THE OUTDOOR GIRLS AT NEW MOON RANCH

DBG385166

LAURA LEE HOPE

"Happy Birthday"
To Judith
From Erma

Mar 8, 1945

THE PONIES REARED AND BUCKED IN GREAT SHAPE.

The Outdoor Girls at New Moon Ranch. *Frontispiece* (*Page* 104)

The Outdoor Girls at New Moon Ranch

or

Riding with the Cowboys

BY

LAURA LEE HOPE

AUTHOR OF "THE OUTDOOR GIRLS OF DEEPDALE," "THE OUTDOOR GIRLS AT SPRING HILL FARM," "THE BLYTHE GIRLS: HELEN, MARGY AND ROSE," "THE BOBBSEY TWINS," ETC.

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THE OUTDOOR GIRLS AT NEW MOON RANCH

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THE OUTDOOR GIRLS AT NEW MOON RANCH

CHAPTER I

ROY OR CLEM?

"WHY so thoughtful, Betty?" teased the girl who had been Grace Ford and was now Mrs. Frank Haley. "You haven't spoken a word for the past ten minutes——"

"Which," put in Amy Stonington Ford, with a fond smile in Betty Washburn's direction, "is a very unusual thing for Mrs. Allen Washburn. But, honestly, what were you thinking of, Betty?"

"Mollie," returned Betty unhesitatingly. "I've been thinking about her steadily ever since I——"

"Saw her with Clem Field and dear old faithful Roy," Grace finished, with an understanding nod. "I know. I've been wondering, too."

"Wondering what?" asked Amy.

Grace waved a bonbon in the direction of their mutual friend, Mollie Billette. The lat-

ter was halfway up a rather rickety stepladder. She carried an ornamental basket of ferns which it was her evident intention to hang in the entrance from the spacious square hall to the still more spacious living room. Two young men supported the ladder and looked anxiously up at the girl.

"Wish you'd let me do that, Mollie," said Clem Field. "This is no sort of work for a girl when there are fellows around."

From her impressive height, Mollie looked down upon the speaker disdainfully and said in a solemn voice:

"Any kind of work is the work for an Outdoor Girl and she never asks help from a boy—never!"

"Hear! Hear!" cried Roy, on the other side of the stepladder. He let go of it for a moment to clap his hands. The ladder teetered drunkenly and Mollie squeaked. Also, she almost dropped the fern basket on Clem's head!

"Listen!" she said severely, as Roy recovered his hold of the ladder. "Next time you are going to do that, give me warning, will you, Roy Anderson?"

Everybody giggled and Roy looked aggrieved.

"That was one time you needed me, anyway," he suggested dryly.

"Oh, well—when it comes to hanging baskets—" chuckled Mollie, and took another step up the ladder.

The married members of the Outdoor Girls Club exchanged significant glances.

"Looks to me like an even race between Clem and Roy," said Grace, enjoyably nibbling her candy.

"I think she likes Clem," said Betty, adding, with a smile that showed her pretty dimples: "I don't blame her so much, at that. Clem *is* rather a dear!"

"Yes, but good old Roy is the steady, dependable sort that Mollie really should have," objected Amy. "They are so absolutely unlike——"

"That they ought to get along beautifully together," finished Grace.

"All of which," added Betty brightly, "won't make a shade of difference to Mollie when she comes to actually make her choice. She will do exactly what she pleases, so there's no use our trying to settle things for her."

"Nevertheless, one can't help wondering," murmured Grace, and the pleasantly scheming look of the born matchmaker came into her eyes as she watched the girl on the ladder and the two young men.

The beautiful new home of Stella Sibley in Deepdale was the scene of this reunion of the Outdoor Girls, married and not married.

All the "old crowd" were there; Betty Nelson Washburn who had married the successful and popular young lawyer, Allen Washburn; Amy Ford, Will Ford's wife; and Grace Haley, who had been the last of these three Outdoor Girls to enter the holy state of matrimony.

After considerable persuasion on the part of Frank Haley, Grace had yielded to the latter's persistence to the extent of becoming his wife—and was now one of the happiest brides imaginable.

Mollie Billette, then, was the last of the original quartette of Outdoor Girls to remain unmarried and it was around and about her that this match-making discussion centered.

Roy Anderson—or "good old faithful Roy," as he was sometimes affectionately called by those who knew and liked him best—had accompanied the Outdoor Girls on some of their very first adventures. He had an amiable disposition and a fund of good humor, which goes a long way toward explaining his general popularity.

To be sure, Mollie had never shown Roy any especial favor. But then, as a matter of fact,

she was apt to treat all her would-be admirers with a good-natured indifference that effectually kept them at their distance. But she liked Roy and her friends had more or less taken it for granted that eventually these two would pair off.

Now, however, it was disconcerting to find all their pleasant deductions threatened by the appearance on the scene of Clem Field.

Clem was a dashing, attractive youth still in college and with money enough to make life pleasant for himself and his friends. Mollie's old girl friends admitted his good looks and charm, but they were jealous on Roy's account. It was hard to see "good old faithful Roy" left "standing at the post."

But now the trend of their thoughts was changed by Stella Sibley. The latter, a tall, good-looking young person, flung herself into a chair near the "married girls" and peered anxiously from the window.

"Sister Annie, Sister Annie, do you see a man?" murmured Grace, the while she munched happily on her sweets.

"I'm not looking for a man," retorted Stella, without turning her head. "Or, at least, not altogether."

"You're wondering why the rest of the crowd

don't show up," said Betty. "They *are* terribly late, aren't they?"

Stella nodded.

"Probably Carolyn is holding them up. She's dreadfully pretty——"

"And she knows it," said Amy, with a wise nod of her head.

"I'll say she does," grinned Stella. "She takes about a year to dress and doesn't care who is kept waiting. Slightly wearing—if you have to catch a train or any little thing like that!"

"Carolyn's a dear, nevertheless." With a swish of short skirts Irene Moore joined them. Irene was short and inclined to plumpness. Besides which she was very pretty herself in an impish, impudent way. "I won't have you saying mean things about our new soon-to-be Outdoor Girl, Stella Sibley, even if you *are* my best friend!"

"Oh, she makes a fine Outdoor Girl, once she gets through primping before the mirror," Stella admitted. "I'm fond of her myself. Still——"

"It may not be Carolyn's fault at all that they're late," suggested Betty peaceably. "How about the two others who are going to be initiated to-day——"

"The twins!" cried Irene, sparkling. "They *are* a sketch——"

"And so exactly alike that you couldn't tell them apart if it were not that Lota has a freckle on the tip of her nose!" finished Stella, with a chuckle.

"From a distance, your hail is apt to sound something like this," said Irene, "'Hello, Meg or Lota. Which are you?'"

The "married" girls laughed.

"Must add considerable interest to your adventurings," said Betty.

"It does and they do," returned Irene, wrinkling her funny little nose in cheerful recollection. "One of them plays a trick on you, you know—"

"And they are always doing it," murmured Stella.

"And you don't know which to blame," finished Irene. "The result is, you blame both, or neither—and they get away with it."

From the porch, where she had gone to rest from her labors, accompanied by Roy and Clem, Mollie looked in at them.

"Here they come now," she announced. "At least," she modified, as every one ran out on the porch, "it looks like them. Three girls and two boys. But where did they get the good-looking car?"

"I think it belongs to one of the boys the twins are bringing with them," Stella said, shading her eyes to watch the swift approach of the car.

"Evidently they know they're late," said Betty. "For they are surely breaking all speed laws——"

She broke off as Molly uttered a frightened exclamation.

"That moving van!" she cried. "The horses —why, I believe the horses are running away!"

"There'll be a smash-up!" cried Roy hoarsely. With Clem at his heels, he dashed down into the street.

"Look out!" yelled the latter, waving wildly at the driver of the approaching car. "That van! Swerve to one side, can't you, you idiot!"

The young fellow at the wheel evidently saw the danger—but too late. The girls felt sick as they stood, gasping, waiting for the crash.

CHAPTER II

THE CRASH

FROM where the Outdoor Girls stood together on the porch it seemed inevitable that some one must be dreadfully hurt, perhaps killed, in the crash.

The moving van, with its runaway horses, dashed directly across the road just as the swiftly driven car reached the intersection.

With a grinding of brakes the roadster swerved swiftly to one side. There was a thud as the front fender of the car came into forceful contact with the rear of the moving van. The girls screamed as the machine, like a toy automobile, hesitated for a moment with two wheels raised high off the ground; then calmly, almost deliberately, ran off the road and turned over on its side!

Meanwhile, the moving van that had caused all the damage rushed blindly down the side road, the driver sawing at the reins and shouting wildly to the maddened horses.

"They're killed! They're killed!" cried the

girls, and rushed down the road toward the overturned roadster.

Clem and Roy were there before them. The latter whirled about, looking rather white and shaken as the girls came up to him.

"It's all right. Don't get excited," he cried. "Nobody's hurt. They—they fell in a flower bed!"

This seemed like a fairy tale to the terrified girls, but the next moment they saw that it was true.

A large estate bordered that side of the road and this, in turn, was shut off from the highway by a hedge. Behind the hedge rhododendrons and peony bushes were massed in profusion. The roadster, checked in the turning over process by the hedge, had spilled its cargo into as soft and colorful a bed as one could wish!

There sat the victims of the accident, looking rather dazed and shaken-up, to be sure, but otherwise none the worse for their hair-raising adventure.

The two boys had already picked themselves up, rather ruefully stretching out arms and legs to make sure that no bones were broken. Now they turned to the girls. But the latter had recovered themselves, too, and refused to be helped.

"If we are going to be Outdoor Girls we've got to learn to look out for ourselves," the twins said, extricating themselves with some difficulty from the mass of bushes.

Carolyn Cooper put both hands to her golden, curly head and screamed.

"My hat! I've lost my hat!" she wailed. "Oh, somebody find my hat!"

"It was the latest Paris sports model, too!" cried Lota, clapping both hands to her heart in a comic gesture of despair. "Find it, some one! Hurry—before she dies of fright!"

"Humph!" snorted one of the new boys. "Lucky you didn't lose your head, Carolyn."

"I should say so, with you driving, Hal Duckworth!" retorted the fair-haired girl, with spirit. "Why don't you keep your eyes on the road?"

"With you beside me, how could I?" the lad retorted, with a grin.

"Gracious!" exclaimed Meg Bronson, a sturdy, forthright girl, with intelligent eyes and humorous mouth. "If Carolyn has that effect on you, Hal, I'll see to it that next time *I* occupy the front seat!"

"It would be just the same," said Hal gallantly, and everybody laughed at the look Meg threw him.

"You expect me to believe that?" she cried.

It was about this time that some one realized that, since there was no tragedy, introductions were in order. Carolyn made them with the tact and sunny smile that had already endeared her to the Outdoor Girls.

While the young people are busily engaged in meeting each other a moment will be taken to describe briefly some of the adventures of the Outdoor Girls up to the present time.

Their adventures began with the well-remembered hiking and camping trip told of in "The Outdoor Girls of Deepdale."

From then on interesting experiences followed thick and fast, among other places, at Rainbow Lake, in Florida, and at Wild Rose Lodge. Then came that summer of glorious adventure in the saddle and, later, the thrilling vacation at Cape Cod where they had met and helped Sally Ann Bevins, the New England girl.

They remembered with pleasure the more recent trip along the coast of Cape Cod in Clem Field's motor boat, the *Liberty*. It was during this adventurous cruise that they had met and befriended Carolyn Cooper and were successful in restoring her to an uncle who, curiously enough, had his residence in Deepdale.

In the book directly preceding this, entitled "The Outdoor Girls at Spring Hill Farm," the

young people had participated in a treasure hunt, though the thrilling adventure had started as a quiet and quite ordinary vacation on Spring Hill Farm.

During the course of these adventures, the original Outdoor Girls had dropped out, one by one. First there was Betty Nelson, their loved "Little Captain." Betty, as already mentioned, had married Allen Washburn, the young lawyer, and, as Mrs. Washburn, was gloriously happy.

Amy Blackford, another of the original quartette, had married Will Ford, brother of Grace Ford. And Grace was now Mrs. Frank Haley.

So, of the original number of Outdoor Girls only one remained unmarried—Mollie Billette, she of the dark eyes and quick tongue. And, from present appearances, the girls had every reason to believe that Mollie would soon follow in the trail her friends had blazed!

At the time of their first visit to Cape Cod, the girls had made the acquaintance of Stella Sibley and Irene Moore. These two jolly, decidedly worthwhile girls had later joined their club.

Now, at the time of the present story, three new members were about to be initiated, Carolyn Cooper and the Bronson twins, Meg and

Lota. Meg's real name was Margaret, of course; but she had so long been known by the affectionate nickname that her friends were apt to forget that she had any other.

The Bronson girls were orphans. But they were fortunate in the possession of a guardian, Daniel Tower, who made up to them as far as he was able for the immeasurable loss of their parents. Tower was a lumberman, a fine, bluff old fellow with waving white hair, twinkling eyes, and a ruddy complexion. Perhaps it is sufficient to add that he was every bit as kind-hearted as he looked.

When the lumberman settled in Deepdale, Meg and Lota came on to join him. There they all met—and fell in love with—the Outdoor Girls and their club, with the result that they had finally been asked to join.

This brief explanation leads back to the point where the rapidly driven motor car had collided with the moving van, depositing its occupants in the midst of a flower bed.

"This is Hal Duckworth," said Carolyn, introducing one of the new boys to the Outdoor Girls. "As you may already have gathered, he was at the wheel when this terrible thing happened. It's a wonder we weren't all killed."

"It is!" Mollie agreed, as she and the other Outdoor Girls, married and single, acknowledged the introduction to Hal Duckworth.

"Still I think Mr. Duckworth was very clever to land you in a flower bed instead of a sandbank," chuckled Irene.

Hal Duckworth threw her a grateful glance.

"That's the first kind word I've heard since I landed," he said.

"'Landed' is right!" giggled Lota.

The second youth, Dick Blossom, was a bit harder to know than his friend and bosom chum, Hal Duckworth. He seemed rather shy with the girls. His smile was ready, but his hands, big and bony, often got in his way to such an extent that, in sheer desperation, he would thrust them into his pockets and keep them there until necessity forced him to remove them from that safe sanctuary. In spite of his bashfulness, or perhaps because of it, the unmarried girls liked him immediately and the married girls felt a yearning to take him under their wing.

The introductions once accomplished, the boys turned their attention to the motor car. It, like the girls and boys, was uninjured, but the hedge and flower bed into which it had plunged were considerably damaged.

"We'd better go back to the house," Stella suggested. "Peters can bring our car down and haul this one out."

"Bright idea," said Hal Duckworth immediately. "I suppose Peters is the hired man?"

"Chauffeur," Stella corrected. "Come along, everybody. It's time we started our meeting."

As the young people, in hilarious spirits now, trailed along toward the house Betty and Amy, arm in arm, glanced back toward the scene of the wreck.

Mollie still lingered there; beside her were both Clem and Roy.

"I wonder if either has proposed?" murmured Amy, with apparent irrelevance. But her chum understood.

Betty chuckled.

"Probably both!" she said.

CHAPTER III

NEW MEMBERS

As Amy and Betty sauntered happily up the road, leaving Mollie to follow with the two boys when she would, they were impressed anew with the beauty of Stella Sibley's new home.

The house stood on a small eminence with a velvet stretch of lawn sloping down to the road on one side and bounded on the other by a fringe of dense woodland. Spruce and fir trees stood out in handsome relief against the white of stucco and marble and here and there the smooth green of the lawn was broken by vivid splashes of color, flowers in well-tended flower beds.

"A month from now the whole place will be a riot of color," said Betty dreamily. "Isn't it nice that Stella can have such a lovely home?"

Amy nodded, and pointed toward the house.

"And if I'm not very much mistaken, there is Stella herself on the porch beckoning us to hurry," she said, with a smile. "Evidently she wants to get the party started."

In the house they found every one assembled. As they entered they were greeted by a burst of merry music. Meg and Lota were perched high upon one of the window seats made by a boxed-in radiator. Meg strummed on a banjo while Lota plucked merrily at the strings of a ukulele.

Stella slid across the polished floor to the grand piano, sought and found the right key and plunged into the melody of the popular ballad they were playing. Not to be outdone, Carolyn and Irene immediately raised their voices in more or less melodious song.

They ended on a prolonged high note that sent Betty's hands to her ears in laughing protest and broke finally into a peal of laughter.

Stella whirled about on the piano bench. She saw Mollie standing in the doorway with Clem and Roy and, on a mischievous impulse, whirled around again and began to play the wedding march!

Irene put an end to that by sitting rather heavily on the keyboard. She swept Stella's hands from the piano with a reproachful look.

"I won't have Mollie teased!" she cried. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Stella Sibley! And in your own house too!"

However, Mollie betrayed no embarrassment

at Stella's mischievous trick. To be sure, she frowned a little and those who had been watching closely—Betty and Grace and Amy, for instance—noticed that she flushed a little under the tan of her skin. But to the others she appeared merely brisk and businesslike, ready and eager to plunge at once into the serious part of the meeting.

"Here, Lota and Meg, put up those ukes——"

"Mine isn't a uke—it's a banjo," corrected Meg indignantly.

"Well, it makes just as much noise," returned Mollie, to a chorus of giggles. "Put it up, anyway, until after we have our business meeting."

"No one can become an Outdoor Girl who doesn't mind Mollie," added Stella sternly.

This dire threat had the desired effect. The ukulele and banjo disappeared as though by magic and the girls assumed as demure an appearance as was possible with them.

"We want to become Outdoor Girls," they chorused plaintively and Mollie signified that they might, provided they behaved themselves.

Then the serious part of the meeting began. At least, it was supposed to be serious. But by this time the girls were in such a state of high spirits that they giggled at nothing and the

slightest sally from any one sent them all into roars of mirth.

First there was the business of the initiation. The three prospective new members were blindfolded—to which Meg protested most vigorously.

"We wouldn't do that to a horse or a dog where I come from," she said. "And, anyhow, what good is a blind Outdoor Girl?"

"If you don't watch out, you won't be any kind of an Outdoor Girl!" Mollie threatened, and once more Meg subsided.

After the blindfolding, they were made to do a series of "stunts." One of them—the one probably over which there was most screaming and fun—was the old trick of "walking the plank."

An ironing board placed on two chairs was the plank. Then the victim, usually protesting volubly, was helped up to the plank and assisted in her perilous pilgrimage by Outdoor Girls stationed on either side of the ironing board.

Having arrived at the extreme limit of the piratical plank, the blind-folded girl plunged with a scream into space—and landed in the midst of a heaped-up pile of cushions!

"You are much too kind," said Lota when this part of the ceremonies had been completed. "I

fully expected you would have a wash tub waiting to receive us at the end of the plank. It would have been far more realistic."

"We thought of that," Mollie admitted. "But you looked so nice in your pretty new dresses we hadn't the heart to ruin them."

"Never mind about ruining *us!*" said pretty Carolyn ruefully. She rubbed an elbow that had come in rather forcible contact with the back of a chair. "Next time, girls, we'd better wear our bathing suits!"

There were other ceremonies, of course, such as eating long strings of underdone macaroni which they had been told ahead of time were garter snakes and being forced to sit in chairs already containing very much inflated balloons that went off with a loud plop when sat upon.

"Good gracious, I'm shot!" cried Meg, and the audience of girls and boys went off into paroxysms of mirth at the look upon that young person's face.

At last came the final ceremony, at the end of which they were to be pronounced full-fledged Outdoor Girls.

Mollie seated the three victims in a row where they sat perched on the extreme edge of their chairs, not knowing what terrible thing to expect next.

"Honorable initiates," began Mollie in deep stentorian tones, "we are about to subject you to the last test——"

"Thank goodness!" said Carolyn, with heartfelt earnestness. Meg and Lota giggled nervously.

"Moreover," said Mollie sternly, "if any one dares to so much as utter a word between now and the time the test begins, that one will be forcibly expelled not only from this room and house, but from the club of the Outdoor Girls as well."

At the conclusion of this awful threat Mollie paused significantly. Not a sound broke the stillness. Meg opened her mouth as though to say something, evidently changed her mind, and closed it again. Mollie proceeded.

"We have here, a bone!"

Carolyn was heard to scream faintly. But as Mollie turned in her direction, stillness once more prevailed.

"It is a thigh bone," said Mollie. This time there was a distinct stir among the victims and the sound of muffled laughter from the audience. "It is the thigh bone of a remote ancestor of one of you three girls. He was a very vicious character——"

"Must have been great, great-uncle Tobias,"

murmured Lota. "He was a pirate and I think he had only one leg."

"This is the thigh bone of the other," agreed Mollie. Then as the victims began to giggle, she resumed more sternly. "This bone I am about to give to you. You will pass it, one to the other, and if any one drops, or so much as fumbles this bone, that one shall be considered unfit for the service of the Outdoor Girls and shall be forcibly expelled therewith." She paused while the girls fidgeted and looked uneasy.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

A faint "yes" answered her.

Carolyn was nearest, so that she was the first to receive the bone. She squeaked at the cold, damp feel of it—it had been previously moistened in ice water—but with an effort of will managed to hold on to it and pass it to her neighbor.

Lota took the bone and screamed.

"It—wiggled!" she cried and hastily thrust it into the hand of her twin.

"Oh, my goodness, what an awful thing!" cried Meg. "Take it, some one! Or must I go on holding it forever?"

Mollie signaled to Betty, who was half doubled up with laughter.

The former Little Captain of the Outdoor Girls took pity on Meg and accepted the reputed thigh bone of great-uncle Tobias, the pirate. It was then placed on a tray by Grace and hastily relegated to the kitchen.

"Whew!" cried Meg. "That was the worst of all."

"Can't we take off our bandages now?" begged Carolyn. "They're hot."

"Take 'em off!" cried Mollie.

When the girls could see again three pairs of bright eyes turned eagerly toward Mollie. That young person had risen to her feet. Now she held out her hand toward them impressively.

"New members, the Outdoor Girls, married and single, salute you," she said, a certain gravity in her voice belying the sparkle of her eyes. "We ask you only to carry on as we have tried to carry on, to be square and meet all situations bravely, to make the name of the Outdoor Girls a respected one in the community, as we have tried to do. Greetings, comrades. Come forward and accept the hand of friendship!"

CHAPTER IV

A REAL PARTY

THERE were cheers from the "gallery" at the conclusion of Mollie Billette's little speech. But the faces of the new Outdoor Girls were grave as they came forward to "receive the hand of friendship" first from Mollie, then from Stella and Irene, and then, last of all, from the line of "married girls."

There was something affecting about the little ceremony. Even the boys, sitting a little apart, felt it, as they looked gravely on.

Meg said finally, speaking for all of them:

"It's awfully good of you to have us. We appreciate no end your letting us join your club. We know what people think of the Outdoor Girls in Deepdale. We'll do our best to—make them keep on thinking it!"

"Hear! Hear!" cried Clem.

The boys clapped noisily and called upon other members of the club for "speech! speech!" until it was all Mollie could do to restore order again.

"This is a business meeting," she told them severely. "You boys are merely permitted to look on until the business is attended to. If you can't keep quiet, you will have to go outside."

Roy grinned.

"What's the matter with you fellows, anyway," he demanded, turning on the other boys. "Don't you know the girls want to do all the talking?"

"They will, anyway," drawled Hal Duckworth. "So we might as well let 'em."

The answer of the girls to this was no more than a withering stare. But the stare at least had the merit of restoring comparative quiet and Mollie proceeded with the business of the meeting.

"In the first place," she said, "it's time we elected new officers. We have six members now so that we shall need more than a leader to keep the business of the club in order."

She paused; then continued to the ring of deeply interested listeners:

"I was thinking it really would be fun to have a secretary—some one to keep a record of the things we do. And then it might be a good idea to have dues and some one—a treasurer, of course, duly elected—to take charge of them."

"That would be fine," Irene said enthusiastically. "Then when we give a party or something we can take the money from the treasury instead of having to chip in each time."

"And we could use some of the money to get a club pin," added Stella. "We really ought to have one, you know."

The married girls heard these suggestions with interest. They, the suggestions, were a decided departure from the old established regime of the Outdoor Girls Club, but, somehow, the idea of officers and dues and a club pin added a new glamour to an old and well-loved institution.

Mollie shot one of her bright-eyed glances at them.

"What do *you* think of it?" she asked, a little anxiously.

"Splendid!" Betty returned.

Amy and Grace agreed with an enthusiastic nod. With a relieved air and greater confidence, Mollie returned to the business of the meeting.

"Well, then," she said, "now that it is settled we are going to have officers, it only remains for us to elect them."

"One is elected already," Irene retorted quickly. She ran over to Mollie and put an arm about her. "No one will ever be our leader but Mollie Billette."

Though she flushed with pleasure, Mollie's answer was a decisive shake of the head.

"I have been leader long enough," she said firmly. "It's time some one else had a chance to head the club. In other words," she finished, avoiding the pleading looks of Stella and Irene, "I want to resign my leadership."

"Well, then, you shan't!" It was Stella who spoke and there was something in her voice that drew all eyes to her expectantly. "It's one thing for you to resign, Mollie Billette, and quite another for us to accept your resignation."

"You *can't* resign unless we let you," Irene backed her chum up warmly. "And we won't. Will we girls?" She turned to them appealingly.

"We won't!" cried Carolyn.

"We want Mollie!" chorused the twins in unison.

"Hear! Hear!" cried Clem, and again the clapping broke out from the sidelines.

"Mollie forever!" cheered Roy.

The object of all this loyal enthusiasm flushed, tried to speak, choked most unaccountably, for Mollie, and was forced to turn away for a moment. When she faced them again, her eyes were suspiciously bright.

"You—you are all dears," she told them. "But I'd really made up my mind to resign——"

"Then you'd better unmake it at once," said Stella.

Betty made a suggestion.

"Why don't you be quite businesslike and take a vote?" she said. "That would settle the question, even for Mollie, I imagine."

Irene pounced upon the idea.

"All those in favor of Mollie for leader of the Outdoor Girls Club say 'aye.'"

"Aye!" they chorused with enthusiasm.

"All contrary-minded, say 'no!'"

To this there was dead silence. Irene's arm tightened about Mollie's shoulder.

"That makes it unanimous. You see how much chance you have to shake off the leadership, don't you, Mollie Billette?"

"Well—" hesitated Mollie, more affected than she cared to show.

"For another year, anyway," Stella pleaded. "You've simply got to, Mollie!"

"All right," said Mollie, with a sudden smile. "I never dreamed you'd want me so much. I accept."

At this there was such violent and prolonged cheering from the "gallery" that Stella threat-

ened to call in both the chauffeur and the gardener in case the boys found it impossible to behave themselves.

"We could lick 'em!" boasted Clem, and suggestively flexed an athletic forearm.

However, they quieted down after a few minutes and proceeded with the other business.

By a unanimous vote Stella was elected secretary and Irene treasurer.

"We'd better watch her," suggested Meg, with a droll look at Irene, " or some one of these fine days our new treasurer will be walking off with the company's funds."

"That all depends on whether you make it worth my while or not," said Irene, giggling. "We haven't decided on the amount of the dues yet."

"So we haven't," agreed Mollie. "Well, we'll do that next."

A sum was agreed upon, and Irene roused considerable merriment by demanding that the dues be collected at once.

"I'll feel my responsibility more with the money in my pocket," she explained.

Laughingly the girls went for their pocketbooks and a collection was taken up.

"Can't we drop a nickel in the slot, too?" asked Hal Duckworth. "We really ought to

contribute a little for all the entertainment you've given us."

This offer was rejected with the scorn it deserved.

"We must remind you that this is a meeting of the Outdoor *Girls*," said Carolyn icily. "You and your friends are only here on sufferance——"

"Well, as long as we aren't suffering—" murmured Roy.

Ignoring him, Mollie proceeded with the business of the meeting.

"We've settled on our officers now and the amount of our dues. Next we ought to decide what we'd like in the way of a club pin."

This was a subject for serious consideration. Mollie had brought a book with her wherein were illustrated several hundred varieties of pins. Finally, after a great deal of discussion, they decided on a design that seemed to typify the ideals of their club for them. This was the figure of a prancing horse set in a crescent of silver. The horse was riderless, mane and handsome tail flying.

"Looks like Black Beast at the ranch, doesn't it, Meg?" asked Lota of her twin.

The latter nodded, a longing look in her eyes.

"Wish I could feel him under me right now,"

she said. "As Buffer says at the ranch, 'there is a hoss which am a hoss!' "

So the pin was at last decided upon and Mollie promised to send out the order immediately.

With this decision the meeting came to an end. Mollie snapped to the cover of the booklet and looked about her with dancing eyes.

"Get out the old uke and banjo," she challenged. "We're going to forget business now for a little while and just have a good time."

This statement met with genuine and enthusiastic approbation. The ukulele was found on the couch between Clem and Roy where—remarked Irene—"it's a mercy they didn't crush it between them." Meg twanged her banjo in good style while Stella once more crashed out melodies, or what were meant for melodies, on the piano.

After a while they turned on the radio and danced. Hal Duckworth, who was an exceptionally good dancer, gave them an exhibition of the newest steps, choosing light-footed Carolyn for his partner.

Roy and Clem still kept close to Mollie and speculation was rife among the friends of the reëlected leader of the Outdoor Girls.

After a while refreshment time came and the boys and girls fox-trotted happily into the beau-

tiful oak-paneled dining room of Stella's new home.

Clem led Mollie to a divan at one end of the long room. Grace noticed his frown when Roy also brought an ice and small cakes to a seat beside the dark-haired girl.

The three married girls, matchmakers to the very core of them, exchanged meaning glances.

"Something is going to happen there before long," drawled Grace, thoroughly enjoying the prospect. "Mollie can't keep both those boys dangling forever."

"Probably she enjoys seeing them dangle," chuckled Betty. "If I know anything about Mollie—and I think I do—she won't be in any great hurry to put them out of their misery."

"At that, they don't look so very miserable," contributed Amy, with her quiet smile. "Clem seems to be enjoying his ice—and there goes Roy for more small cakes!"

"A smiling face," said Grace sentimentally, "may hide an aching heart, for all that, Amy. Anyway, it's much more romantic to think of them as suffering. I prefer it!"

"Listen," said Betty suddenly. "Lota is saying something about a ranch. Sounds interesting!"

As a matter of fact, Lota's discourse proved

so interesting that all the young folks stopped their chatter to listen to her.

"Uncle Dan just bought the ranch a little while ago," she finished. "It's called the New Moon and it has a lot of timber on one end of it."

"That's what Uncle Dan really bought it for —the lumber," explained Meg. "But it's a glorious ranch, just the same, with bunkhouses and coyotes and Chinese cooks and everything."

"*And* horses?" asked Mollie, leaning forward eagerly.

Meg waved a hand airly.

"Horses? Any number of them!"

"And travel!" added Lota. "My, how they can travel!"

"Stop!" begged Mollie. "It makes my mouth water!"

"Wouldn't it be nice," said Meg, nibbling busily at a piece of cake, "if we could all go there?"

CHAPTER V

UNCLE DAN

For a moment there was a dead silence while the girls stared at Meg Bronson. Then Mollie drew a deep breath.

"Of course you are only joking," she said. "For a moment I thought you were in earnest."

Meg continued to nibble at her cake, hiding her mischievous, twinkling eyes from them.

"Well," she said innocently, "why shouldn't I have been in earnest? Does it sound so—impossible?"

Plaintively the eyes of the Outdoor Girls wandered to Lota.

"What is she talking about?" demanded Irene, sudden excitement in her voice. "You ought to know. You're her twin!"

Lota's eyes danced but her mouth was demure.

"Maybe she means what she says. Why don't you ask her?"

Here Meg took pity on them.

"Why," she said, "I was sort of trying to ask

you how you'd like to go out to New Moon Ranch."

"You ask us how we'd like——"

Stella ran over to Meg and shook her.

"Do you mean that as a proposition?" she demanded.

Meg chuckled.

"You go and sit down and I'll tell you what I mean," she promised.

Stella reluctantly obeyed. The eyes of all the Outdoor Girls were fixed upon Meg Bronson. No doubt but what she held their attention now!

"You see," began the Western girl, playing lazily with her ice, "as we were saying, Uncle Dan bought this ranch mostly for the timberland that's on it. But there's a great big, rambling ranch house on the place, with stacks and stacks of rooms——"

"Just going to waste," Lota interjected.

"Exactly," Meg agreed. "So Lota and I, we sort of put our heads together and wondered if we couldn't figure out a way of using those rooms."

"You did!" breathed Carolyn.

Meg gave her an odd glance.

"We did figure out a way, if that's what you mean," she said. "We thought that if the Out-

door Girls wanted an outing, why, New Moon Ranch was about the best place in the world to go for it."

"That *was* a real inspiration," cried Mollie happily. "Is it all settled, then?"

"Well," Meg drawled, a humorous wrinkle between the eyes, "it's all settled except for one little thing——"

"What is that?" the girls, in chorus, demanded to know impatiently.

"Well," again the humorous drawl was evident, "*we're* willing—but how about Uncle Dan?"

The girls stared at her incredulously.

"You mean to say you haven't even asked him yet?" cried Stella Sibley.

Irene had been about to execute a dance of jubilation. Now she paused in the midst of a step and looked at Meg disconsolately.

"I just knew there was a catch in it, somewhere!" she said.

"A catch in what?" boomed a hearty voice from the doorway.

The young folks whirled about to see a huge man standing in the doorway. Daniel Tower was six feet two in his stockings. He was broad-shouldered and deep-chested. As he stood there he seemed to fill the doorway completely.

However, as he moved to one side, the surprised girls espied Mr. Sibley smiling at them in the background.

Meg and Lota ran to their guardian, flung their arms about him and dragged him into the room.

"Uncle Dan!" cried the latter. "What brought you here?"

"You might better ask, *who* brought me here," said the lumberman in his deep, booming voice. He made a smiling gesture toward Mr. Sibley. "I happened to meet this gentleman and he brought me on here to have a peep-in at you youngsters and to shake hands with the Outdoor Girls."

Mr. Sibley followed the lumberman into the room and genially introduced him to the young people. The boys afterward declared that they were entirely cut out by the older men. The girls surrounded the latter at once, plying them with attentions—which included ices and more of the little round cakes—and in other ways spoiling them completely.

Mr. Sibley accepted the attentions with his usual genial good nature. But old Daniel Tower fairly beamed.

"I've heard a lot about the Outdoor Girls of Deepdale. In fact," with a twinkling glance at

the twins, "I've heard very little of anything else since we came here. But I must say," he added with pleasant elderly gallantry, "that now I've seen 'em I don't believe my girls talked half enough about them."

Irene cried impishly:

"Bring another ice, some one. That was worth it!"

Mr. Tower laughed and tweaked her ear.

"You've Irish in you, Miss Irene," he said. "I can tell it by the look of your eye——"

"And by the way my nose turns up!" finished Irene sorrowfully. "I know! That always gives me away."

After considerable more of this sort of banter, in which all the young folks joined, Daniel Tower repeated the question he had asked upon entering the room.

"When I came in I heard some one say there was a catch in something, somewhere," he boomed. "I reckoned," with a chuckle, "that from the way it was said, the young person wasn't thinking of the catch on the front door——"

"No, Uncle Dan," said Lota, with a mocking glance at Irene. "When she spoke of the catch, she meant you."

Daniel Tower looked from one to the other of

them, his keen grey eyes searching their laughing faces. Meg broke in, putting an arm about her guardian's broad shoulders.

"I won't have you teasing Uncle Dan," she cried. "Listen, guardian, while we tell you what it's all about."

Uncle Dan listened while the twinkle deepened in his eyes.

"So you've gone and made all your plans and then ask me about it later!" he said, pretending sternness. "Well, I like that!"

Lota coaxed.

"But we felt sure you'd let us, Uncle Dan," she said. "All those rooms are going to waste, anyway."

Daniel Tower capitulated. He pinched Lota's cheek and his eyes grew soft.

"We could stow all the Outdoor Girls—and the boys too, for that matter—in one wing of the old ranch house and never miss the room," he said. "It would brighten up the old place to have young people about. In fact," he admitted, the twinkle spreading to his whole face, "I was going to make the suggestion myself!"

If Daniel Tower was popular before with the Outdoor Girls, how much more so was he after this declaration! He was plied with ice cream

and cake until it was a wonder he lived through it.

However, he and Mr. Sibley left after a while, declaring that they still had business to attend to, and the boys and girls were left to their excited happy plans for the future.

"I think your uncle is a darling!" cried Mollie Billette.

"Yes, so we gathered!" said Clem.

"He is." Lota did not deign to notice Clem's interruption. "So is New Moon Ranch. Just wait till you see it."

"That's just it!" cried Carolyn Cooper, doing a jubilant pirouette about the room. "How long shall we have to wait?"

"Probably that's up to us," said Stella. "If we can get the folks to consent——"

"Your dad already said you could go," Irene pointed out enviously.

"If your folks do the same we might as well start right away—by the end of this week or the first of next, at the latest," announced Meg.

"You needn't worry about dresses or things like that," added Lota. "We'll probably just about live in riding togs."

"What's worrying me—" said Roy, and the married girls noticed how his eyes found and

lingered upon Mollie. "What I'd like to know is, where do *we* come in?"

Lota looked at him in surprise.

"Oh," she said carelessly, "perhaps you could come up for a little while later on."

"Hooray!" cried Clem. "We'll out-cowboy the cowboys, fellows."

"You bet!" said Hal Duckworth. "We'll show those guys what riding really is!"

"Is that what you learn at Princeton?" teased Carolyn, and to punish her, the young fellow whirled her about the room in a wild dance, bringing up, breathless and panting, upon the divan at the far corner of the room.

The boys and girls had planned a hike up the river as a fitting climax to their big day. But the arrival of Mr. Sibley and the lumberman delayed the start until it was too late for a worth-while hike.

"We'll have plenty of time for that up at New Moon Ranch, anyway," said Irene blissfully. "Meg and Lota, your guardian *is* a dear!"

CHAPTER VI

THE FAREWELL DANCE

Grace Haley gave a farewell party. It was a hastily arranged, informal affair, for the girls were anxious to be off—they had, indeed, set the date of departure for the following Monday. Perhaps the very informality of Grace's party was responsible for its success.

Everybody was invited and everybody came. There were Betty and Allen Washburn, Allen as handsome and as devoted to his pretty young wife as ever. Then Will and Amy Ford—Will a little stouter than in the past and loud in his praises of Amy's cookery.

"What if I am getting fat," he retorted in response to the good-natured raillery. "How can a fellow help but eat when he has a cook like Amy for a wife?"

Grace had a pretty cottage not far from Betty's and only a stone's throw from Amy's bungalow. Although the furnishings were modest and inexpensive—Frank's income still did not allow of many luxuries—Grace had managed

to impart to the interior an air of good taste, almost of elegance, that was very pleasing.

To-night she had the furniture pushed back to the wall and as much space as possible cleared for dancing. The young couple had a new radio, too. It is safe to say they were prouder of this than of any other furnishing their home contained.

To-night the cottage was filled with flowers —Amy and Betty had gathered armfuls of blooms from their own carefully tended flower beds—and there was an atmosphere of good cheer and jollity that the young folks found very contagious.

Mollie, looking unusually pretty in a flame-colored frock that gave her the appearance of a naughty gypsy, came escorted by both Clem and Roy—a fact not overlooked by the married girls. Clem had driven them, with Stella and Irene, in his car.

The Bronson twins, Carolyn Cooper, and the two new boys, Hal Duckworth and Dick Blossom, appeared a short time later in Hal's car—which, by the way, had long since been rescued from the flower bed and was, as the lad himself expressed it, "going strong" again.

Meg and Lota were dressed exactly alike in sea green frocks that made the resemblance be-

tween them even more striking than usual. They seemed to enjoy the bewilderment of their friends and did all in their power to increase it. If it were not for that betraying freckle no one could have told which was Lota and which was Meg.

Carolyn wore a pale pink frock in the form of flower petals that made her look like a flower herself—at least, Hal Duckworth seemed to think so, for he danced with her to the music of Grace's radio a good deal that evening and was almost always to be found close at her side.

Dick Blossom, on the other hand, caused a great deal of merriment. He was frankly bewildered by the almost uncanny resemblance of Meg to Lota and Lota to Meg.

"He likes them," Grace confided to Betty, when they went out in the kitchen to see about refreshments. "But no one can tell which he likes best."

"Probably he doesn't know himself," chuckled Betty. "They are as like as two peas—except for that freckle."

"And you can't see that until you get close up to them," added Grace. "Even then, you don't actually like to *look* for it. It's most embarrassing."

"Dick Blossom seems to find it so," laughed

Betty. "Between them, those two girls are teasing him unmercifully."

But the real object of interest to the original members of the Outdoor Girls Club was, naturally, Mollie and her duel escort.

"She is taking more than her share of the boys," Grace complained, toward the end of the evening. "And there aren't enough men to go round as it is. I shouldn't wonder," with a deep frown, "if I shall have to speak to her about it."

"Leave her alone," Amy advised. "She acts sort of queer this evening, anyway."

Betty looked up quickly.

"What do you mean—'queer'?" she asked.

"Why, she isn't like herself at all," said Amy. Her eyes traveled to Mollie as she sat in rather serious conversation with Clem. "You know Mollie. She is usually the life of any party she is in. And look at her to-night—so quiet you'd hardly tell she was around."

"Yes, and what's more," Grace broke in significantly, "I've caught her looking at Clem and Roy sometimes with a curious, puzzled expression on her face. It isn't like Mollie at all."

"Maybe something serious is the matter with her. She may be sick and needs to see a doctor," Amy sounded genuinely worried.

But Betty shook her wise little head and smiled.

"I don't think it's that sort of sickness, Amy dear," she said. "It's probably the same kind we have all had, at some time or other. You know what I mean. I've watched both you and Grace turn thoughtful—and in both cases wedding bells followed close behind."

The two girls chuckled and wound their arms about Betty fondly.

"You were thoughtful for a long time, Little Captain," said Amy, giving her the old name, "before you decided to make Allen happy!"

Betty smiled and her eyes wandered to Allen where the young lawyer stood in earnest conversation with Frank Haley—they were probably discussing the relative merits of radios!

"*That's* the kind of sickness Mollie has," she said. "When a girl turns thoughtful—that way—well, just watch out for wedding bells, that's all!"

"I know, but we can't tell *which* she likes," Amy protested. "And she's so *secret* about it! We don't even know whether they've proposed or not."

"She'll tell us when she gets ready," said Betty,

with another wise little shake of the head. "Until then we'll just have to be patient."

It was a glorious party. Between charades and dancing and the very excellent caterer's supper served out on the lawn, it was well into the early hours of the morning when the party broke up and the happy revelers turned their steps homeward.

"It was a beautiful party, Grace," they all told her, and Carolyn added challengingly, "You will have to give us another one when we come home."

"I will," Grace promised.

She stood on the porch with Frank until the last of them had disappeared. Then with a sigh, she said:

"It *was* a good party, dear."

"It was," Frank agreed, as he put an arm about her and drew her into the house. "But it was the radio that made it go!"

Meanwhile another young married couple were engaged in a conversation that might have proved of interest to the Outdoor Girls and their friends if they could have heard it.

Betty and Allen strolled slowly home through the fragrant night. At the steps of their pretty home Allen hesitated.

"It's such a beautiful night. Let's not go in for a while."

Betty nodded and sank down upon the steps, her head against a pillar of the porch. Allen took out his pipe—without which no night, however beautiful, could be complete! He puffed in perfect contentment for a while, then turned to Betty with his whimsical smile.

"Why so thoughtful?" he asked, and added gently: "Tired?"

"No," said Betty dreamily. "Not a bit tired. Just wondering——"

"About what?" asked Allen, coming a little closer.

"Why—about Mollie. You fancy yourself as a young man of considerable intelligence." She leaned over and tweaked his ear. "Maybe *you* can tell me which it will be—Clem Field or Roy Anderson?"

Allen caught the hand that had tweaked his ear; but his expression was suddenly thoughtful.

"Do you think it has come to that, Bettykins?"

"I think Mollie will have to make her choice before very long," said Betty. "And we're awfully fond of Mollie, you know. We'd hate to see her make a mistake."

Allen puffed at his pipe for a moment in silence.

"Well, now I'll tell you what I think," he said, the whimsical smile reappearing. "I think it would be a shame to leave old Roy out in the cold."

"Of course it would." Betty's voice was just the least shade doubtful. "But then, dear, if she really *cares* for Clem——"

But Allen was unexpectedly stubborn. Here was a case where his loyalty was challenged.

"No, sir! Clem is all right—I like him myself—nice fellow and all that. But if Mollie knows what's good for her she'll stick to Roy. He's one boy in a thousand—old faithful, every time."

A silence fell between them. After a while Betty said softly:

"The best I can wish for her, whether it's Roy or Clem, is that she'll be as happy as we are."

To this Allen replied in the tone that always made his young wife wonder if it were not a little wicked to be so happy:

"A pretty tall order, Bettykin. But we'll wish it for her, anyway!"

CHAPTER VII

THE MYSTERIOUS MEN

"Isn't it wonderful of the Outdoor Girls to take us in and be so nice to us?" This from Lota Bronson as she and her twin sister, Meg, swung up Pine Avenue toward the boarding house that was their temporary home.

"Isn't it?" agreed Meg happily. "Their club is the finest thing that ever happened."

"And now we are Outdoor Girls!" continued Lota. "Think of the good times we are going to have!"

"Think of the good times we've already missed!" said Meg ruefully. "When Mollie and Stella and Irene begin to talk of some of the wonderful things that have happened to them, it makes me downright jealous."

"All the girls are so much fun. And the boys are a perfect scream," chuckled Lota. "Could anything be funnier than the way Dick Blossom tagged us both around at Grace's party the other night——"

"And couldn't tell the difference between us,"

laughed Meg. "Every time he started across the floor toward us I expected he'd say, 'Please, are you the girl with the freckle?' I know perfectly well he wanted to."

"We'll have to do something about that freckle," decided Lota soberly. "It really is the only distinguishing mark between us, twin. With that gone we could have no end of fun. Think of the tricks we could play on people!"

Meg chuckled.

"I guess they think we do enough damage as it is. I suppose it was a life saver for Uncle Dan," she added reminiscently. "Remember what a hard time he had at first to tell us apart?"

"He has now—especially if I put powder a little thick on the end of my nose," said Lota, wrinkling that member happily. "He never knows which to scold, you or me——"

"And he generally ends up by scolding neither," said Meg, suddenly grave. "Uncle Dan's been awfully good to us, Lo."

"Don't you suppose I know it?" returned her sister. "When you think that he really isn't any relative, only Dad's business partner, and that he really didn't have to take us at all when Dad died—well, it makes you pretty grateful."

"And I suppose we've been awful sometimes,"

said Meg ruefully. "We should be ashamed of ourselves for plaguing him so."

"Oh, I don't know!" Lota was suddenly gay again. "Uncle Dan likes to be teased. I think if we stopped playing pranks on him, he'd think we were going to die or something."

"Anyway," said Meg, reverting to the original topic of conversation, "it's lucky for us we came on with him to Deepdale, or we never should have met the Outdoor Girls."

"I wish we could live somewhere besides this stuffy old boarding house, though," said Lota.

"Oh, don't be so silly," retorted Meg who, though so like her twin in outward appearance, was unlike her in temperament. "The girls came to see us, not the boarding house. Hello! I wonder who's here?"

They had mounted the steps of the boarding house. Meg's exclamation was caused by the sound of men's voices—angry voices—just within the hall.

The girls hesitated, not quite sure whether to go forward or to stay where they were. While they hesitated they heard scraps of a conversation that was to remain in their minds for many a long day.

"Oh! so you think you're going to get away with that, do you?" came one voice sneeringly.

"You're a fool, Tisson!" said another voice that they recognized, for it belonged to Mr. Tower. "You'd better get out before I put you out."

"Oh, we'll get out all right—for now!" an entirely different voice responded. "But we'll settle this when we get out to New Moon Ranch."

"And we'll settle it our way, too!" said the man who had spoken first.

Daniel Tower spoke only one word, but that word together with the tone in which it was uttered was exceedingly eloquent. What Daniel Tower said was "Git!" and the two men got!

Meg and Lota gained only the impression of scowling faces under soft-brimmed hats as the two men brushed past them and hurried off at a slouching half run.

Then they hurried into the hall and almost ran into the lumberman. The latter stood with his hands clasped behind his back and the expression of his face was very thoughtful.

"Uncle Dan!" cried Lota, turning his great bulk about until he was forced to face her. "We couldn't very well help hearing! What is the matter?"

For a moment the frown lingered upon the

lumberman's rugged face. Then, with an apparent effort, he smiled.

"Matter?" he repeated, rather vaguely. "What should be the matter?"

"Those men!" said Meg impatiently. "We heard them threatening you——"

Daniel Tower frowned again and his great hands clenched.

"*Them* threaten me!" he muttered. Then with an effort, forced himself to smile again. "Nothing for you to worry your heads about, chickens," he said, pinching their red cheeks playfully. "Those two coyotes they lost their tempers a little bit, seems like."

"But they said something about New Moon Ranch," Lota persisted.

"Don't mean a thing—not a thing!" asserted the lumberman hastily. It seemed to the girls that the denial was a little too hasty! "They was just getting rid of a little spleen, that's all. Probably they feel better, now it's out of their systems. Now you just run along and don't bother your heads about what you may have seen or heard. Don't mean a thing—not a thing!"

With this assurance the girls were forced to silence, though they were not reassured by it, at

all. It seemed to them that Daniel Tower studied them thoughtfully as they turned away. Might it be that he was wondering just how much they had seen or heard?

They speculated considerably over the mystery when they went to their room in the hot upstairs of the boarding house. But, without further assistance from Uncle Dan, they were unable to explain it and gradually turned their minds to other things.

That was not very hard, since the time of their departure was only two days off and there were matters enough to discuss before they left Deepdale for the "great open spaces."

Still, they could not put the vision of those angry men nor the memory of their angry words completely from their minds. That night as they were falling off to sleep in the big bed that sloped downward in the middle, Meg raised herself on her elbow.

"Asleep?" she inquired of her twin.

"Wish I was," said Lota ungraciously. "What's the matter now?"

"I was just thinking," said Meg, "that we may meet those two men and solve the mystery when we reach New Moon Ranch."

Lota groaned and buried her head sleepily in the pillow.

"And she woke me up to tell me that," she complained to the opposite wall. "Why, you silly, I thought of that long ago!"

The endless two days that intervened before they could hope to start for New Moon Ranch went by at last and the morning dawned when the Outdoor Girls and the four boys were to meet at the Deepdale station for what Clem jocularly termed the "take-off!"

Mollie, Stella and Irene, accompanied by Clem and Roy, were the first to arrive. Then came Meg and Lota with their Uncle Dan.

Carolyn, Hal Duckworth and Dick Blossom were so long putting in an appearance that the girls began to be seriously worried for fear Carolyn would miss the train.

When they finally did appear, it was evident, even at a distance, that something unusual had happened.

"Carolyn's excited," chuckled Stella. "I can tell by the way she's waving her hands about. Wonder what's up now?"

CHAPTER VIII

THE TAKE-OFF

SOMETHING had happened, but not, as Carolyn Cooper hastened to assure the others, to any of them.

"It's just something we saw," she said, when the young folks tried vainly to get a coherent story from her. "We were passing the boarding house—you know, the one where you've been living, Meg and Lota——"

The twins nodded impatiently.

"Well, what about it?" they demanded.

"I'm telling you! When two men sneaked around the corner of the house and looked into one of the windows on the lower floor."

Meg stole a glance at her guardian and saw that he was suddenly alert.

"What *did* you do?" demanded Daniel Tower.

"We just stopped and watched them to see what they would do next——"

"And what *did* they do next?" chorused the twins.

"I'm telling you!" This was Carolyn's favorite exclamation and one that cropped up frequently in moments of excitement. "We just stood there watching them——"

"They seemed half inclined to climb in the window," Hal Duckworth interpolated. "If they had, of course that would have been our clue to do the big grabbing act."

"But suddenly one of them looked up and saw us," Carolyn continued. "He said something to the man with him and they both turned and ran."

Mr. Tower exclaimed suddenly and started forward.

"Did you follow them?" he asked eagerly, unable entirely to mask his interest.

"Yes, sir," it was Dick Blossom who spoke this time. The girls noticed that the lad's rather large hands were gripped in sudden excitement. "We followed them, but they had disappeared."

"Disappeared!" cried Mollie, who had been following the story with interest. "Why, how could they, in such a short time?"

"There was a high fence back of the boarding house; possibly you remember it, sir," said Blossom, still addressing himself to Mr. Tower. "The fellows probably made a break for that

fence and got over it before we turned the corner of the house."

"And we were so late by that time," Carolyn added, "that I wouldn't let the boys climb the fence, as they wanted to. I was afraid we'd miss the train."

Mr. Tower nodded.

"You were wise," he said, with a wave of his hand up the tracks. "Here comes the train now. Another three minutes and you *would* have missed it."

"But did you see the two men?" asked Lota. As Carolyn nodded Meg asked eagerly:

"What did they look like?"

"Very ordinary appearing fellows," said Hal. "Dressed in clothes that might well have stood a little pressing. One was tall and the other was short. That's really about all we had time to notice about them."

Lota glanced at her guardian; then said, distinctly:

"Were they wearing slouch hats?"

"Seems to me they were. I—" Hal began, when Carolyn interrupted him.

"Yes, they were!" she said. "I remember that. They had the hats pulled down well over their eyes, so that we could hardly see the upper part of their faces."

Meg and Lota exchanged significant glances. This was either a very remarkable coincidence or those men were actually the same who had brushed past them so hurriedly that day on the boarding house veranda.

What did it all mean?

They turned toward their guardian, but the latter had advanced down the station platform as though to meet the train.

"He doesn't want to talk about it," Meg whispered.

Lota nodded.

"Anyway," she said as the train drew into the station and the young folks surged forward to meet it, "we didn't have to wait until we got to the ranch to find out more about those men."

But what *did* it mean? Again the Bronson twins asked themselves the question and again they found no answer. Only one thing, perhaps two things, were apparent: First that these men had a quarrel with Daniel Tower, and second that the lumberman had some reason, mysterious or otherwise, for refusing to talk about it.

"Oh, well, probably we'll see them again at the ranch," said Lota.

"And if we don't," added Meg, "perhaps it will be all the better for us!"

Mr. Tower had secured good accommodations for them aboard the Chicago flyer.

After they had said a reluctant good-by to the boys on the platform and had promised to write early and often about their good times on the ranch, the girls inspected their surroundings with interest.

"We're going to be some time aboard," Mr. Tower said, when they had discussed their plans for the trip. "So we might as well be as comfortable as possible."

"We take up about half a Pullman by ourselves," Mollie chuckled. "The Outdoor Girls sure have grown!"

"In numbers, if not in quality," said Irene wickedly, at which Carolyn tossed her pretty head and retorted:

"I wonder just what she means by that!"

"It sounded like a dirty dig," laughed Meg. "But just to be mean and spoil half her fun, we won't get mad about it."

The hours in the coach passed quickly for the young travelers, broken by the always-fascinating calls to the dining car. Uncle Dan—the girls all called him that—bought magazines and candy for them until Mollie laughingly called a halt on his extravagance.

"I know I've gained at least ten pounds to-day,

eating candy," she said. "If we don't look out, we'll have to go to the hospital, instead of to New Moon Ranch!"

But although the first day had gone swiftly, the second promised to drag a little. The girls had begun to weary of the flying scenery. Even the observation car with its tempting back platform had lost something of its fascination. It was about this time that Mr. Tower brought a proposition to them.

"How would you like to stop off at Chicago for a day or two?" he asked.

The girls were instantly interested.

"Oh, might we?" cried Irene Moore, clapping her hands. "We could shop round and buy things and have a lovely time."

Mr. Tower smiled at her enthusiasm.

"Don't buy too many things, though," he warned. "We have considerable luggage to carry as it is."

Meg, who had been studying her uncle closely, asked suddenly:

"Why do you want to stop off in Chicago, Uncle Dan? I thought you had planned to go straight through."

"Business," replied Mr. Tower shortly. "I've got to see some men there. And as long as you don't care——"

"Care!" repeated Mollie. "Why, we'd love it!"

So "that was that" as Stella said. It was settled that they were to stop off for a day or two, perhaps more, in Chicago; then on, later, to New Moon Ranch.

They reached the great metropolis on the lakes sooner than the girls had expected—all but Mollie, who was the only one who had studied the time table. There were such crowds and confusion in the cavernous station that there was real danger of their becoming separated unless they kept very close together.

Lota had just said as much to Meg when she heard the latter gasp.

"Look over there!" Meg whispered excitedly. "Those two men! Did you ever see them before?"

CHAPTER IX

WINDOW SHOPPING

"WHAT men? Where?" asked Lota Bronson stupidly in response to her twin's question.

Meg forgot good manners and pointed.

"Over there, silly! Quick! Before they get out of sight!"

Lota caught a glimpse then of two men who slipped hurriedly through the crowd. The next moment they were swallowed from sight.

"Oh, dear!" wailed the girl. "I could scarcely see! Who did you think they were, Meg?"

"*Those* two men," said Meg, with conviction.

Lota was bewildered.

"But how could that be?" she protested. "Carolyn and the boys were sure they saw the men at Deepdale."

This statement gave Meg pause. But after a moment's thought she gallantly overrode the difficulty.

"How do we know but what they boarded the train at Deepdale at the very last minute?" she asked triumphantly.

"You mean the same train we were on?" asked Lota dubiously.

Meg nodded.

"We-ell, maybe. But I must say, I don't think it's likely," said the other twin. "You may be mistaken, Meg. Those probably were not the same men at all."

"Maybe not." Meg's forehead wrinkled in a puzzled frown. "Only, if I was *not* mistaken it's practically certain those men are following Uncle Dan—and for no good purpose, I'll wager!"

Conjecture was cut short at that point by their arrival at the street. Mr. Tower hailed a taxi and the young folks piled in merrily. The fact that they were crowded made the adventure all the more fun.

The lumberman took them to the Ardmore Hotel and there left them to their own devices.

"There's some trouble about the lumber tract up to the ranch," he told them vaguely. "I've got to see the former owner. Guess likely you young folks can amuse yourselves till I get back."

They assured him that they could. But Meg and Lota kissed the old lumberman with more than their usual affection and watched him very thoughtfully as he swung off through the crowd.

"He's such a dear," Meg murmured. "I wish I knew for sure whether it *was* those two enemies of his that I saw in the station."

"Well, don't worry," said Lota, as she turned away from the window. "I imagine Uncle Dan can take care of himself all right."

"What are you two girls talking so solemnly about?"

They turned to see Mollie smiling at them from the doorway. She had already removed her hat and smoothed her hair. Now she came in and sat down on the twins' double bed.

"We were talking about Uncle Dan," Meg confessed.

Lota added impulsively:

"We're terribly worried, Mollie!"

After that of course there was nothing to do but tell the whole story to Mollie. And while they were thus engaged, Carolyn came in and after her, Stella and Irene.

All listened with interest until the twins had finished their recital. Then Mollie said seriously:

"It does sound mysterious, girls, for a fact. But I wouldn't worry, if I were you. These two men may have a grudge against your Uncle Dan. But I dare say he has made many enemies during his lifetime——"

"And he's still here to tell the tale," finished Irene.

"Well, anyway," said Lota, unconvinced, "it's a mystery and I don't like mysteries—unless I can clear them up."

"We may even do that," suggested Mollie. "We'll stick around and keep our eyes open, anyway."

"How thrilling!" cried Irene Moore, wrinkling up her funny little nose. "We'll be full-fledged detectives before we know it."

"In the meantime, I'm starving to death," announced Mollie.

"As we came along I saw a nice little restaurant around the corner with a pig roasting on a spit in the window," Stella Sibley contributed. "Why not give it a tryout?"

"What—the pig?" asked Carolyn.

"Maybe," Stella returned. "Though I must say, it seems a little warm for pork."

The thought of food was a pleasant one and the girls had soon removed the stains of travel sufficiently to permit them to appear once more in public.

In high spirits they went off to inspect the pig.

After luncheon all the girls, except Meg, wanted to make the rounds of the big stores.

"Of course we'll only window shop," Carolyn

conceded. "I might get a new bag if I see one I like, that's all."

"Lots of fun," grumbled Meg disconsolately. "Thought maybe we could all go to a movie or something."

"Plenty of time for that to-night," Irene reminded her.

Lota added with a chuckle:

"When the stores are closed!"

"All right, come on," said Meg. "No use trying to make you change your mind if you're bent on spending money!"

"Too bad Clem and Roy couldn't be here," Stella remarked, innocently, as they started off. "They would provide us with so much entertainment——"

"Squabbling over Mollie," chuckled Irene. "If you don't watch out, leader," added the mischievous girl, "there will be a real flare-up between those two boys before long!"

Mollie smiled serenely.

"They *are* rather foolish, aren't they?" she agreed. "I can't imagine what's the matter with them."

"Oh, no you can't!" cried Irene, laughing. "Oh, Mollie, Mollie, you *are* so funny!"

"I'm glad I amuse you," said Mollie, still unruffled. But Irene noticed that she turned to-

ward a store window with evident relief and changed the subject with more haste than seemed entirely necessary. "How do you like that hat?"

" 'Exquise,' as our French teacher would say," Irene returned. She could not resist one last little shot. "I think Clem would like that—or maybe Roy!"

"Your French teacher would not say 'exquise,' " returned Mollie coolly. Mollie was an excellent French scholar. "The word for hat, chapeau, being masculine, she would probably say 'exquis.' "

Almost any girl will understand what a perfectly satisfying, enjoyable time the Outdoor Girls had that afternoon. With nothing to do but wander through the shops, buying little odds and ends of things, which, they assured themselves, could be slipped into odd corners of any grip, no matter how tightly packed, the hours of the afternoon flew on swift wings. They were thoroughly surprised when Mollie's wrist watch told them that it was five-thirty o'clock, and more than time to return to the hotel.

"I hope we know how to get back," Meg said ruefully.

They had wandered for a considerable distance in the course of their window shopping

and the streets of Chicago were strange to them.

"We don't want to lose ourselves," said Mollie, hesitating.

"Let's take a cab." This was Stella's suggestion. Irene took it up eagerly.

"We can pay for it out of the club dues! There's a cab now!"

Before her companions could guess what she was about, Irene darted into the street to hail the passing taxicab. She failed to see an automobile driven swiftly in the opposite direction.

Carolyn screamed.

"Irene! Jump!"

CHAPTER X

A DODGE IN TIME

To THOSE on the sidewalk it seemed that Irene Moore must be instantly killed. Men shouted, women screamed, one or two turned and began to run blindly from the scene.

But two of the Outdoor Girls *acted*.

Meg sprang forward. Behind her only a step or two, was Mollie. Meg was a strong girl, well built and husky. Her hands gripped Irene's shoulder, dragged her backward. At the same moment the driver of the car saw the danger, swerved swiftly. The running-board grazed the girl's dress as the machine whizzed by.

Feeling faint and sick, Mollie helped Meg get Irene to the sidewalk. They were immediately surrounded by a crowd of sympathetic pedestrians.

"Get back, please," begged Meg. "Don't you see she feels faint?"

Irene, who, only a moment before, had turned at Meg's grip on her shoulder to see death charg-

ing down upon her, had turned a sickly white. Even her lips were grey, though she tried to smile reassuringly at the girls.

"I'm—all right," she said. "Thanks to Meg —and Mollie. I—I would like a drink of water, though."

A policeman rushed through the crowd. He was big and burly with a red face and kindly eyes.

"Anybody hurt?" he asked curtly.

"No." By this time Mollie's voice was steady. "Only a near-accident, officer."

"Humph!" said the policeman, staring at Irene. "You look pretty sick, just the same. Better get into the drug store and let them fix you something."

So under the wing of the law, the Outdoor Girls made their way through the dwindling crowd. In the drug store an interested clerk "fixed Irene something."

"Drink this," he said, setting a fizzing glass before her. "In about two minutes you'll feel like dancing the sailor's hornpipe."

Irene smiled wanly.

"I think," she said, wrinkling her nose, "that I'll put it off till to-morrow!"

However, the drink and a few minutes' rest worked wonders. Irene declared presently that

she felt quite herself again and was ready to go to the hotel.

"If it hadn't been for you, Meg," she said, while the kindly clerk summoned a cab for them, "I might not be feeling so happy right now."

"Oh, nonsense," said Meg, a trifle gruffly. "If I hadn't pulled you out of the way of the automobile, Mollie would have. Don't," she added, as Irene started to speak again, "let's talk about it. I don't like to think of—what might have happened."

As a matter of fact, they were all willing enough to drop the subject. It was enough for them that every one was safe and happy and that they were bound once more toward the Ardmore and Mr. Dan Tower.

At the hotel the Bronson girls went at once to the clerk at the desk.

"Has Mr. Tower come in?" asked Meg.

The clerk replied that he had come in only a few moments before and had got his key. Enquiries at the elevators elicited the fact that he had gone directly to his room.

"I thought he would be waiting here for us," Lota told Meg, as they turned away from the the elevators.

"We've hardly seen him all day," Meg re-

turned. "It isn't like Uncle Dan to act this way."

"He likes to be with young people so much," Lota mused. "It must be something pretty serious that keeps him away from us all the time."

Meg nodded.

"Something to do with those two funny looking men, I shouldn't wonder," she said.

"He certainly doesn't act like himself, anyway," Lota agreed. "I'm afraid something has gone wrong with him."

However, they were not to find out what that something was until the following afternoon when Lota came, quite unexpectedly, upon a disturbing clue.

They had been out bus riding almost all afternoon. During the ride Lota had met with misfortune. She had lost the little purse she always carried and in it was her week's allowance.

Back at the hotel she learned from the clerk at the desk that her guardian had returned and she went at once to his room to ask him to furnish her with more pocket money.

When her knock at his door brought no response, Lota felt the knob. Finding that it yielded to her touch she swung open the door quietly, thinking to surprise her guardian as she had often done in the past.

What she saw made her pause and draw in her breath sharply.

Daniel Tower sat before the desk, apparently lost in thought. That it was troubled thought, Lota could see by the worried frown on her guardian's usually placid, benignant face.

But this was not what startled her. It was something else that caught and held her fearful attention, something hard and shiny and bright, that lay on the desk before the lumberman. Two pistols, ugly weapons, weapons that meant business!

Lota slipped further into the room and the slight sound she made aroused her guardian. He turned toward her quickly and with a stab at her heart Lota noticed how his hand reached instinctively toward one of the black-barreled revolvers on the desk.

"It's—it's only me, Uncle Dan," she said rather falteringly; then added with forced lightness: "Don't shoot! I surrender!"

The lumberman smiled, and with a quick gesture, swept the weapons into a drawer of the desk.

"You come in as quietly as an Indian," he chuckled. "Looks like you had some squaw in you, at that."

Lota came and sat on his lap.

"Now, look at me, Uncle Dan," she directed.

"That ain't difficult," chuckled the lumberman. "Yes sir, I've done a sight harder things than that, seems like."

"I want you to tell me something," said the girl sternly. "No side-stepping, if you please, sir. Uncle Dan, you don't usually go heeled. You hate firearms. I know, because I've heard you say so."

The bluff old lumberman nodded acquiescence.

"Right you are, girl. They're dangerous critters, guns. You get a grudge against some one, say, that probably ain't no better nor worse that yourself. You meet this feller and you get into an argument. First thing you know, that gun at your belt, it begins to itch to spit out fire. Most generally it does, too. Then you're apt to find yourself in for a sight o' trouble. No, you're right. I don't like guns."

"Then what are you doing with those awful looking, deadly things I saw on your desk a minute ago?" Lota demanded.

Daniel Tower hesitated, then, with a weary gesture, surrendered.

"Well, girl, since you know so much, you might as well know the rest. If I don't tell you

I suppose you'll be imagining things are lots worse than they are."

He paused and Lota watched the lines deepen in his kindly old face.

"Fact is," he continued, "these two scoundrels, Black and Tisson, are stickin' to me like a couple of horseflies. They think they got some sort of grudge against me and, since I've heard they're pretty bad actors when they get goin', I thought maybe it would be the part of wisdom to tote around a gun or two myself."

Lota asked softly:

"Are they here—in Chicago?"

Daniel Tower's mouth closed in a grim line.

"They are," he said. "And they probably are goin' to follow me out to the ranch." He paused and looked at his ward speculatively.

"I wouldn't have told you all this, honey," he said, pinching her cheek between his great thumb and forefinger, "only I thought maybe you and your friends wouldn't want to come on to the ranch knowing how things are. There may be a bit o' trouble there," he added, almost apologetically.

Lota was indignant.

"Do you think the Outdoor Girls are going to turn and run, just because these two men haven't any manners?" she demanded.

Mr. Tower chuckled.

"That's one way of putting it," he said. "Might make it a little stronger myself. Still," he added, pinching her cheek again, "you do what you want, girl. Only you'd better warn your friends there may be trouble."

"All right," Lota promised. "But I know right now what they'll say." She paused a moment. "Good-by, Uncle Dan, and—take care of yourself!"

CHAPTER XI

PAINTED SPUR

ALTHOUGH the Outdoor Girls were greatly excited and thrilled by the news Lota Bronson brought them, she was right in prophesying that not one of them for a moment considered turning back to Deepdale.

"We'll have all the more fun," Irene said. "In the movies you never get a real thrill until the villain turns up on the scene. I don't see why it shouldn't be just the same in real life——"

"As in reel life," chuckled Mollie. "Well, maybe you're right. Anyway, we aren't going to be done out of our fun on New Moon Ranch by any number of villains."

Although that was settled, the Bronson twins worried a great deal about Mr. Tower. They knew that he would not have armed himself had he not had good reason to believe that his life was actually in danger.

"If anything should happen to Uncle Dan, I'd shoot Black and Tisson myself. Even,"

Lota added, with a half sheepish smile, "if I *am* deadly afraid of a revolver!"

The twins were relieved when Daniel Tower announced that his business in Chicago was completed and they were once more free to continue on their way to New Moon Ranch.

The girls had three sections in the sleeping car. Mr. Tower engaged accommodations for himself close by.

From the moment the train left for points farther west, the old lumberman's manner changed. He became once more his old, genial self, joking with the girls, exchanging yarns with fellow passengers, making himself generally agreeable.

It was on the second day of the trip when they were all out on the observation platform that the old gentleman told the girls the romantic history of New Moon Ranch.

Mollie started the ball rolling by remarking upon New Moon as an unusual name for a ranch.

"Usually they are called the X Bar X or Double X or something like that," she said. "New Moon sounds odd and—sort of romantic."

"Well, so it is, so it is," agreed the lumberman, puffing contentedly at his cigar. "Ain't so strange that it should sound romantic, though,

seeing as how it was named under sort of romantic circumstances, as you might say."

"Tell us about it," begged Carolyn Cooper. "It sounds interesting."

Mr. Tower smiled at her indulgently.

"Well, you see there's a story about the man that owned that ranch," he said. "He was a tenderfoot, come out of the East for his health, some said. Reckon it was lung trouble he had, because when he first come he coughed pretty bad and he was as white as a sheet. But he had pluck, that young feller had. Yes sir, he had pluck."

The lumberman paused and tapped the ashes from his fat cigar before continuing.

"He went in for stock raisin', and for two or three years he had bad luck. What wasn't winter-killed for him was stole by the rustlers till he hadn't but a few rusty-lookin' cows to his name. Then he took to wheat raisin' and did some better. After a while folks begun to notice he didn't cough so much. He was fillin' out and gettin' tanned and husky. Seems like the air was good for him."

Again he paused and the girls began to fidget. All this was interesting, they thought, but not particularly romantic. And they had been promised romance.

But here the lumberman continued.

"It was about that time, I reckon that he met Maude Bennette."

"Who was Maude Bennette?" Irene Moore demanded.

"As pretty a girl as you'd hope to see in twenty miles of travel," returned the lumberman. "And her dad—he was the orneriest old miser you'd ever hope to see. He'd got a grudge against Todd Davis—called him a tenderfoot and other names which I wouldn't care to mention." Here the lumberman paused and the fine little wrinkles at the corners of his eyes revealed themselves.

"But Todd was pretty far gone and he didn't seem to mind old man Bennette. That made the old man worse, as you may imagine, and finally he got on his high horse and he told Todd Davis never to come nigh his house again. I guess he gave Maude her orders too, because for a while the young folks didn't see each other."

"I don't think much of Todd Davis if he let the old man bully him!" Stella Sibley remarked judicially.

"Well, Todd didn't—not to notice," chuckled Daniel Tower. "It come out later that Todd got word to his girl. He told her that the night

of the new moon he'd have a preacher waitin' there at the ranch. A word to that girl was sufficient."

He paused again and Carolyn asked breathlessly:

"Did—did she come?"

The old man nodded. His eyes were soft as they stared at the majestic mountains rushing past them.

"Reckon she did," he said, puffing lustily at his cigar. "Anyways, Maude and Todd Davis was married on the night of the new moon and from that night all Todd's bad luck turned to good. It was uncanny how that young tenderfoot begun to prosper. And happy——"

He broke off, staring off into space.

"And is that how New Moon Ranch came to get its name?" asked Mollie, after a moment of silence.

Mr. Tower nodded.

"Todd, he named it the New Moon and New Moon it's been ever since."

"Seems strange that he'd sell it when he was so fond of it," Carolyn suggested.

"Seems like Todd got a notion he wanted to raise fruit trees in California," the lumberman chuckled. "Anyway, he's made his pile and he can afford to experiment a little. So you

see," he finished, throwing his dead cigar over the rail, "you're going to a place that has a history, and a pretty romantic history, at that."

Some time later Carolyn whispered to Irene:

"A good place for Mollie. Maybe she'll be able to make up her mind, once she gets there."

"I hope so," said Irene, and Carolyn was startled by an unusual sharp note in the other's voice. "She can't keep those two boys dangling forever. They are getting perfectly silly!"

The rest of the trip was enjoyable but uneventful and they were all glad when a hot afternoon landed them at the little station of Painted Spur.

The day was very hot indeed, the station dusty and uninspiring. As they stood upon the platform, their suitcases banked about them, two lounging cowboys came forward.

"Howdy, Mr. Tower," said one of them, who seemed by the loose way he swung his arms and legs to contain more joints than the ordinary mortal. "Got all your family, I see."

"My family's grown, Bill, since you saw it last," rejoined the lumberman. "Hi there, Ike!" he called to the second cowboy who lingered shyly in the background. "Give a hand with these things, will you? I hope," to the one called Bill, "you brought a mount for me?"

Bill waved his hand toward a handsome bay horse tied to the hitching rail.

"We brought a couple extra ponies," He paused and his lazy glance took in with interest the group of Outdoor Girls. "Figured mebbe some of the young ladies would like to ride."

"Oh, we would like to, Uncle Dan," Meg cried eagerly. "Please let us—and the luggage can ride in the flivver."

"We all want to ride," urged Stella Sibley.

Daniel Tower smiled indulgently but shook his head.

"There aren't ponies enough," he said. "Besides, you know the road to the ranch is a rough one. You will be safer in the car."

"Safe!" pouted Lota, disappointedly. "But Uncle Dan, what Outdoor Girl ever wanted to be safe?"

The old lumberman chuckled and pinched his ward's cheek.

"It ain't so much a question of what the Outdoor Girls want just now," he told her, trying to look severe. "It's a question of what old Dan Tower's goin' to git. Now you pile in, all of you. I ain't goin' to listen to any more nonsense."

Mr. Tower and the cowboys were well

mounted. The girls watched the spirited ponies with envy.

The road was bumpy and dusty. The girls were seized with fits of coughing as clouds of dust assailed them. But as they penetrated farther into the mountains, following a road that climbed ever upward, the beauty of the view broke dazzlingly upon the Outdoor Girls filling them with awed appreciation.

"I've been out West before," said Mollie, "but I don't remember ever seeing a view quite like this."

"Wait till we come out on the ponies some day," said Meg. "I'll show you some real mountain trails then. This is only a taste of what you are going to get."

"It's a pretty good taste, I should say," remarked Irene, shuddering as she looked down into a seemingly bottomless ravine. "If this car should skid——"

For the first time the cowboy Ike spoke. He half turned to them and grinned, showing a mouthful of gold teeth.

"That's why we use flivvers in these here mountains, miss," said Ike. "After a while a Tin Lizzie gets trained so that it can't no more slip than a mountain goat. Take this fliv now,"

he went on. "Reckon she wouldn't no more think of skiddin' than one o' our ranch ponies."

The girls giggled.

"Let's hope she sticks to her reputation, at least until we get to the ranch," laughed Mollie.

"Oh, she'll be all right," Ike assured them. "There's only one thing she's scared of, and that's Pike bridge."

"Oh, *that* old rickety thing!" cried Lota. "Hasn't it been fixed yet, Ike?"

Ike spat reflectively into the road.

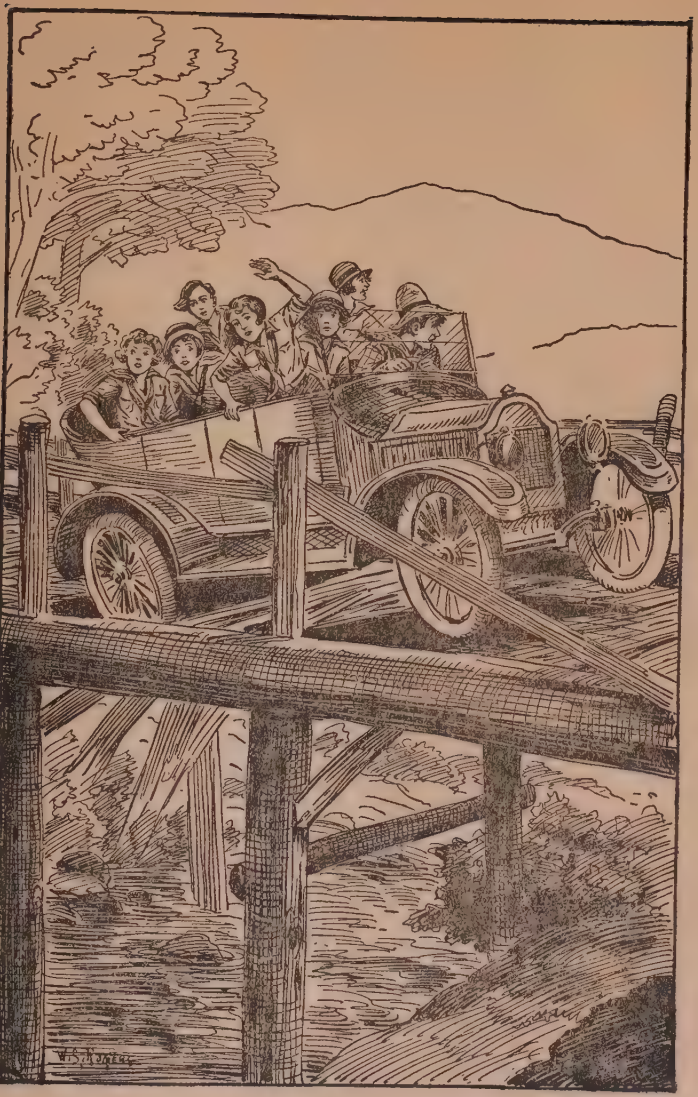
"Reckon that's one o' the things is always goin' to git done, Miss Lota," he answered. "Some day it's goin' to go down and drop somebody to the bottom of the creek. There it is now," he said.

As he turned a curve of the road they saw before them a rough log bridge spanning a noisy stream that probably had its source somewhere far up in the mountains.

"That looks like an earnest stream," Stella remarked, not without a touch of anxiety. "I hope this isn't the day the bridge chooses to collapse."

"It looks pretty rickety," Carolyn said, dubiously.

"Don't you think you'd better go a little



ONE OF THE STRAINING BOARDS CRACKED.

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slower?" This from Irene to Ike, the driver. "I don't somehow trust that bridge."

The cowboy chuckled.

"We might as well hit it up and git over quick," he said, "before the boards have a chance to crack."

With the words Ike stepped on the gas. The girls gasped.

"Hold my hand, somebody!" cried Carolyn. "I've a terrible feeling this minute is going to be my last."

"Nonsense," retorted Meg. "Those ahead got across all right, didn't they? Hold your hats, everybody," she added, as they struck a particularly large bump in the road. "This promises to be good!"

They charged down upon that rickety bridge like a mad bull. The boards of it seemed to rush up to meet them. Then they were upon it, the exhaust of the flivver roaring querulously.

The boards of the old bridge quivered and groaned. Then suddenly something gave way beneath them.

One of the straining boards cracked—there was a jarring jerk as the rear wheels of the flivver sank back into the yawning hole!

CHAPTER XII

THE BROKEN BRIDGE

The Outdoor Girls did not cry out. Perhaps they were too frightened. At any rate, they merely clung together and waited for what would happen.

Ike bent double over the wheel, jammed his foot down hard upon the gas. The car gave a leap like a frightened horse at the touch of the spur. The back wheels were dragged over the edge of the broken board, the car dashed crazily along the remaining stretch of bridge, missing the post at the farther end by the scantiest margin of safety.

They were safe—bumping over the dusty road at a terrifying rate of speed, to be sure, but safe!

For a few moments the girls could scarcely believe in their good fortune. Not a word was said until Ike, the driver, had brought the runaway car to a stop at the side of the road. Even then, Ike was the first to speak.

He whistled long and low and used the ker-

chief wound about his throat to mop his forehead.

"Whew! that was a hot one," he said. "Sure thought we were goners that time!"

"You acted quickly and brought us through," said Mollie. "We owe our lives to you."

"How—how awful!" stammered Carolyn. "I felt the wheels sink right down underneath me——"

"Another minute and we'd have been in the water, sure," said Meg quietly. "Let's go back, Ike, and see how much damage has been done."

They all got out of the car. Shaky as they were, they were very glad to feel the firm ground underfoot.

The bridge was around a bend in the road. When they reached it they looked for the broken board that had so nearly precipitated them into the water.

"Why," cried Irene, "there's a great big hole! It looks as if half the bridge had been torn away."

"It's in bad shape enough," said Lota gravely. "We'll have to put something across the road to warn other people of danger, Ike."

"Yeah," said Ike disgustedly. "And that means we're going to be pretty late gettin' to the ranch, too."

"But how are you going to reach the other side of the bridge?" objected Stella. "There's the hole to cross."

Ike loped over to examine the hole, then said, as though talking to himself:

"Reckon I should be able to jump that, with luck!"

"Oh, don't!" cried Carolyn. "*Nobody* could jump that."

For answer Ike gave her his gold-toothed grin.

"You just keep your eye on me, lady," he said. "I'll show you whether I can or not!"

He went back to the beginning of the bridge, took a running start and—jumped.

It was a magnificent leap, worthy of a wildcat or a leopard. In fact, it reminded the girls of something feline, the play of those splendidly trained muscles as the cowboy crouched and launched himself into the spring.

He reached the farther side of the broken bridge with about a foot to spare. Having arrived at his goal, he whirled on his heel, swept his broad hat from his head and made the girls a low bow.

"At your service, ladies," he called; then returned his hat to his head and went about the business of building a barrier that would give warning of the broken bridge.

The girls watched him with interest as he dragged two broad, flat stones from the woods and placed them on either side of the road. Then he went exploring again, found a fallen tree trunk and propped that upon the stones.

"We'll have to send one of the boys down later from the ranch with a red lantern," Meg said. "That fence is all right in the day time but it would never do at night."

Suddenly Lota began to laugh. The girls looked at her in surprise.

"What's so funny?" Irene demanded. "I must say I can't see anything to laugh at."

"I was thinking of what Uncle Dan said," Lota explained, "about our being safer in the car than on horseback. And they passed over with their horses safe and sound while we almost took a swim in the creek."

"Creek!" Irene Moore repeated. "If this is a creek I'd like to see a rushing torrent!"

"Oh, the creek's swollen just now," Meg explained. "There have probably been heavy rains, or something. Usually it's a harmless enough body of water. Sometimes, in a drought, it almost dries up."

"Look out!" cried Carolyn suddenly. "Ike's coming back!"

The cowboy took another running leap, but

this time he failed to quite gauge his distance. He slipped through the hole. But as he fell his fingers gripped the flooring of the bridge.

The girls cried out in alarm, but Meg laughed reassuringly.

"He's all right," she said. "All he'll get out of this is a pair of wet feet."

She was right. For as she spoke Ike pulled himself up on the bridge, grinning sheepishly.

"One time I missed my guess," he said. "Didn't take a long enough run, seems like. Well, I got to fix this side now."

This was easy as rocks and some brushwood were close at hand. The girls helped pile up the rocks, much to the cowboy's admiration.

"Sure are real outdoor girls, ain't you?" he said.

"We are," came the quick reply.

They climbed back in the automobile and a moment later were roaring up the dangerously steep incline of the road ahead of them.

They had not gone far when they heard the clop-clop of horses hoofs coming in their direction. The riders proved to be none other than Daniel Tower with the cowboy Bill bringing up the rear.

The lumberman shouted his relief at sight of the girls.

"We thought something must have happened when you were so long catching up to us," he explained reigning up beside the car. "What's the matter?" he inquired of Ike. "Engine trouble?"

"No, sir," grinned Ike. "*Bridge* trouble!"

When the lumberman heard the story of the broken bridge he looked very grave.

"That bridge has been in need of fixing for a long time," said the twins' guardian. "Wonder you weren't all killed."

During the remainder of the ride to the ranch Mr. Tower and Bill kept close to the flivver and the latter looked back every few minutes to make sure the car and its occupants was still intact.

"Now that we don't need any help, we could have plenty," sighed Meg. "Isn't that the way of the world?"

It was a long ride to New Moon Ranch but, once they were assured there were no more rickety bridges to pass, the girls thoroughly enjoyed it. The scenery was beautiful in its rugged grandeur. Every mile they penetrated into the hills increased their eagerness for the time when they could mount the ranch ponies and come out by themselves.

"We have a good deal to learn about the ranch

ourselves," Lota explained. "You see, we were out here for only a little while after Uncle Dan bought it and we really didn't have half time to explore as we wanted to."

"Still, we know enough to serve as guides to you girls," Meg added. "And what we don't know we'll soon find out."

Suddenly Lota leaned forward in her seat, eagerly scanning the road ahead of them.

"We're almost at the ranch now," she said. "Just around the bend of the road we'll come upon some of Uncle Dan's timberland. We have to pass through it before we come out on the prairie. Then it's only a little way to the ranch house."

The Outdoor Girls became suddenly alert. Now that the end of their journey was almost in sight every object they met along the road took on fresh significance.

They soon turned off the main road and took to a rough wagon trail. This road wound among towering trees. The girls looked up with a species of awe at the majestic monarchs of the forest.

"I suppose there's a good deal of money in those trees," Mollie said thoughtfully. "It would be a pretty heavy loss to your Uncle Dan

if anything should happen to them—a forest fire for instance."

"I should say so!" Lota returned. "A forest fire wouldn't do Uncle Dan any good at all!"

"They'd come from all around to fight it, though," said Meg. "I don't believe a fire would get very far."

The cool of the forest was very grateful to the girls after the dust and heat of the road. They were sorry when the wagon road led them out upon the prairie again.

Lota shaded her eyes with her hand and pointed eagerly.

"There's the ranch house, on top of the little hill!" she cried. "Do you see it?"

CHAPTER XIII

THE SHADOW

When their dazzled eyes became a little more accustomed to the glare of the sun, the Outdoor Girls did see the ranch house. From the edge of the woods it looked merely like a rather large white blot on the rise of ground that, by courtesy, was termed a hill.

"I had no idea a ranch was so big," said Irene Moore.

"Oh, you've only seen the littlest part of this one," Lota assured her. "Wait till our first day in the saddle. Then we'll show you what a ranch is really like."

"Don't want to wait," protested Irene. "Why waste time?"

"Well, there won't be much of to-day left by the time we get to the house and wash up," Meg pointed out.

"Besides," Mollie added, "when we do take to the saddle we want to start early in the morning and have the whole day before us."

"Oh, all right," sighed Irene. "Only tomorrow seems such a long way off!"

At the door of the ranch house they were greeted by Mrs. Ackerson, the housekeeper. She was a large woman, was Mrs. Ackerson, with a firm jaw and a purposeful eye.

Behind her broad shoulder stooped a pathetic little figure of a man. This bald-headed, apologetic-looking individual was, the girls learned a moment later, Mr. Ackerson.

Mr. Tower introduced them both to the girls and asked Mrs. Ackerson to show them to their rooms. The housekeeper gave them a grim look and complied. Mr. Ackerson followed behind, a suitcase in each hand and the faint, apologetic smile still on his face.

"He seems to be asking you to excuse him for living," giggled Carolyn when the door had closed behind the oddly-assorted couple.

"I reckon he's the most henpecked man in captivity," Stella added.

"Hush!" cried Mollie suddenly. "He's coming upstairs again."

A bumping sound was heard outside in the hall and a moment later Mr. Ackerson reappeared with two more suitcases.

"I don't know where these here go," he began in an apologetic voice.

"Just put them down anywhere," Mollie said pleasantly. "We'll sort them out later."

The little man dropped the grips and hurried from the room, evidently delighted to escape.

"I wonder what he does about the place." Carolyn pulled off her hot, felt sport hat and pushed the hair back from her damp forehead. At that moment she was as pretty as any one very well could be. Stella, coming up behind her, rumpled the fair curly hair until it stood up in a golden halo all over her head. "He's too little to ride or bust bronchos, or whatever it is they do on a ranch," Carolyn continued her train of thought.

"Oh, Ackerson is Uncle Dan's right-hand man. He helps Mrs. Ackerson run the house, too," Meg explained.

"What she really means is that Ackerson keeps house and Mrs. Ackerson tells him how to do it," Lota laughed. "They'll probably provide a bit of comedy for us while we're here."

Three rooms had been set apart for the Outdoor Girls, two of them connecting, the third across the hall. They were furnished in regular ranch house style, oak dressers, chairs and tables and iron beds.

The beds looked none too comfortable. One

of them even depressingly suggested lumps. But it would take more than a little thing like a lumpy bed to daunt the Outdoor Girls. They shrewdly suspected that when night came they would not care where they slept or how, as long as they slept, for the days on the ranch promised to be strenuous ones.

There was considerable argument as to which couple would occupy the room across the hall. Naturally the connecting rooms were more desirable to the girls, because they were more companionable.

Finally the twins settled the question by saying that they would take the room across the hall themselves. This was not altogether unselfish on their part, for that room was nearer to the one occupied by Daniel Tower, and the twins still were uneasily certain that their Uncle Dan needed some one to watch over him and ward off possible dangers.

"Black and Tisson didn't get off at Painted Spur when we did," Meg said, in talking the matter over later with her twin. "But of course there's nothing to prevent them from following Uncle Dan out here on the next train."

To this Lota nodded ruefully.

"They are apt to turn up at any time and at

any mysterious place," she agreed; then added, with apparent irrelevance: "I wonder if Uncle Dan still goes heeled?"

Meanwhile, as soon as they were sure there would be no further interruptions by the housekeeper's husband, the girls set about removing evidences of the eventful automobile trip from Painted Spur.

There was cold water in the pitchers and clean clothes in their grips; the result being that in fifteen minutes or so the girls looked as fresh as though there had been no long train journey followed by a ride along dusty roads.

They trooped downstairs together, eager to see what the rest of the ranch house looked like.

They were met in the lower hall by Mrs. Ackerson who said that Mr. Tower was "over to the corral" and asked if the young ladies would be "pleased to join him."

This the girls agreed very willingly to do.

"We shall have plenty of time on rainy days," chuckled Lota, "to go over the old house. The outside on a ranch is always much more interesting than inside, anyway."

She and Meg led the way past bunkhouses and stables to the corral. This was situated some distance beyond the ranch buildings; an open enclosure surrounded by a high, strong fence.

On this fence some cowboys were perched like a "lot of sparrows in a row." The observation was Stella's.

Inside the corral were a number of ponies, grazing lazily. One or two submitted contentedly to a rub-down furnished by indolent, but competent cowboys.

Daniel Tower was talking to a lean, hard-jawed fellow who appeared to have more authority than the others on the ranch. Mollie pointed him out with interest.

"Who is he?" she asked the twins.

"That's Dippy, the foreman," Lota answered.

"His real name is Joe Ginnis," added Meg. "But the boys call him Dippy—just because he has such a lot of hard common sense, I suppose!"

When they neared the fence, the cowboys jumped down, gallantly offering to assist the girls if they cared to share their perch.

This offer, like all others of the sort, was received with scorn.

"As if we couldn't climb that fence without help!" ejaculated Mollie.

"Watch us!" Irene added.

They made good their boast by scaling the fence as easily as the "boys" had done.

"I've heard as how these modern girls was all

independent," said Buffer, another long, lean cowboy of Ike's type.

The Outdoor Girls sat on the fence and watched with interest while Bill and Ike performed some simple "stunts" for their entertainment. The ponies reared and bucked and charged across the field in great shape, bringing up short just when it seemed as though they must crush the rider against the fence.

It was all very thrilling and had the effect of making the girls more eager than ever to try the saddle for themselves.

In the midst of the impromptu entertainment there came, from the direction of the house, the welcome sound of the dinner bell.

With a hurrah they scuttled down from the fence. Only Meg remained on it.

"Oh, Bill!" she called. "Come over here, will you?"

Bill obligingly trotted the little sorrel pony he was riding close to the fence.

He touched his broad-brimmed hat and said, in his drawling voice with the western twang:

"What can I do for you, ma'am?"

Meg frowned.

"You can tell me what's wrong with Black Beast," she said. "I've been watching him, Bill. He limps."

"Yes'm." Bill followed the direction of her gaze. A handsome black horse grazed quietly at one end of the corral. When he moved forward to find a more succulent clump of grass he limped perceptibly. "Yes'm," repeated Bill reluctantly. "Black Beast, he stepped in a hole out there on the prairie and that hoss, he mighty near broke his laig."

Meg looked relieved.

"It's only a strain, then?" she questioned.

"Yes'm. A pretty bad strain, but Black Beast, he'll get over it. Got to rest for a spell though. Ain't nobody dare ride him for the next month, anyways."

"Oh," cried Meg in disappointment, "then I probably won't get to ride him while I'm here."

"There's plenty other hosses, Miss Meg," Bill pointed out.

But Meg, climbing down from the fence, shook her head.

"Not like Black Beast. Take care of him, Bill."

The cowboy promised and a rather thoughtful Meg followed her friends to the house.

The dining room of the ranch house proved to be a large, low-ceilinged room next to the kitchen in which the Chinese cook, Ming Wah,

wrought his culinary triumphs. The meal on this particular evening was one of his best and the girls praised it and complimented the chef until Ming Wah's ordinarily cheerful countenance was stretched in a wide grin. After that first night nothing was too good, in Ming Wah's judgment, for the Outdoor Girls.

After dinner they danced to the tin-panny music of an antiquated phonograph. But they were too wearied from their long journey to enjoy much of this strenuous exercise and there were soon demands for the banjo and ukulele of the Bronson twins.

These were produced and the entire party gathered on the broad porch, singing or listening contentedly to the musical strumming of the twins.

Mollie sat a little apart from the others and, as the evening wore on, grew very, very thoughtful. If Betty had seen her then she would have nodded that wise little head of hers and prophesied. The other Outdoor Girls, stealing occasional glances at their leader, felt the spirit of prophecy stirring in them also.

"It won't be long," they thought; and then added inevitably: "But which one?"

They went to bed early that night, for it had been decided to rise betimes the following

morning and get an early start on the adventures of the day.

The girls tumbled into bed and were almost instantly asleep. All except Lota, who stood so long near the open window of her room that Meg, rousing from her first sleep, called to her at last impatiently.

"What's the matter with you, silly? Aren't you ever coming to bed?"

Lota sighed and turned reluctantly from the window.

"I thought I saw something—or some one—over near the corral fence," she said; then added, as Meg merely grunted sleepily: "I suppose it was a shadow."

"Of course it was a shadow!" said her twin, turning restlessly. "Do hurry and turn in. I'm dying for sleep."

As Lota slipped in beside her sister, she was not quite so sure that what she had seen was only a shadow.

CHAPTER XIV

THE COPPERHEAD

THE next day the Outdoor Girls started off early. They were clad in riding suits and each proudly carried a new quirt.

This was a surprise prepared for them by the lumberman, and it was a joyful one indeed. The quirts were strong and supple—the very best, in fact, that could be had.

"Not that we'll ever use them," remarked Irene Moore, as she switched the long, snakelike coil about her riding boot. "But they do make us look like cowgirls sure enough."

Two of the cowboys were ordered by Mr. Tower to ride with them. The girls did their best to reverse this order, feeling that they would like to have this first outing to themselves. For a time the lumberman remained adamant.

"You need them to look out for you," he said. "Suppose you should come across a wildcat or a bear in those woods? What would you do?"

"The same thing that you'd do, Uncle Dan," returned Meg. She pointed to the rifle she carried across her saddle bow.

"Aren't likely to meet any lions or tigers where we're going," she said. "But for all that, it's just as well to go prepared."

"Ugh!" said Carolyn, shivering at sight of the weapon. "You'd better go on ahead of us, Meg. I'd not stir a step if I thought that awful thing was bringing up the rear."

"No chance she'd mistake you for a wildcat," Irene teased her.

"A cat, but not so wild," giggled Stella and dodged as Carolyn coiled the quirt in her direction.

At length Mr. Tower yielded to the girls' pleading and they prepared to set off without the cowboys as guides or protectors.

"Why don't you carry a rifle, Lota?" Mollie asked curiously, as she mounted her pony. "You've lived out West most of your life. You must be used to weapons."

"I'll never get used to them," Lota replied. "Just to look at a shotgun or a revolver makes me feel sick. I'm quite willing," she added, with a laugh, "that Meg should do all the 'toting' for the family."

At this point Meg touched her pony lightly with the tip of the quirt and he was off like an arrow, neat little hoofs pounding over the stubbly prairie grass.

The others followed, strung out in a galloping, reckless, carefree line. At the edge of the woods Meg waited for the rest to come up to her.

"From here on we'll have to follow one of those awful mountain trails," she explained. "Most of the way it's so steep you think you are climbing a perpendicular wall."

"Sounds interesting!" said Stella.

Irene added, not without a trace of anxiety:

"Any danger of falling over backward?"

"Not if you let your pony have his head," Meg cautioned. "Whatever you do, don't get scared and saw at the reins!"

The others followed her in single file, careful to let the reins lie loose upon the glossy necks of their ponies. Up and up climbed the trail until it seemed that it must eventually reach the sky.

But at length they were on level ground again, with a panorama of gorgeous view before them that nearly took their breath away. For a short distance the trail remained wide enough for two of the ponies to travel abreast. Then it narrowed again to a mere footpath.

Suddenly Meg stopped and beckoned the others to her. Her head was bare, her wind-blown hair whipped about cheeks flushed with exercise, in her eyes was a reckless light.

"This trail is a mean one," she told them.

"Soon it comes out upon the edge of a ravine and from there on winds about the side of the mountain for some distance.

"On the other hand," she pointed with her quirt into the forest, "there is another trail that leads into beautiful country where there isn't any danger of falling into a bottomless ravine. What do you say?" Her dancing eyes challenged them. "Shall it be the safe path or the dangerous one?"

"We've never been afraid of danger, and I for one—" Irene began boastfully, when Stella stopped her with a gesture toward Mollie.

"It's what our leader says, you know," she rebuked her chum. "How about it, Mollie?"

"Don't do it, Mollie," protested Lota. "Some of these mountain trails are pretty treacherous —especially when you don't know them very well. Don't take a chance. Some of the girls——"

"*You're* not afraid, are you?" cried Mollie challengingly.

"Me? No!" was the short reply.

"We are all good riders, Lota," said Mollie, more placatingly, "and we know we have good ponies under us. We'll take the mountain trail! It will be all right."

Carolyn started forward as though about to

protest. However, she thought better of the impulse, closed her lips tight and lifted her chin.

If the other girls weren't afraid to follow Mollie, thought Carolyn, she wouldn't be the one to squeal!

Meg whirled her pony about and started up the trail. Lota followed close behind her with Mollie coming next. The others strung out, Indian style.

Meg soon proved that she knew this mountain trail very well. A short distance further on it narrowed perceptibly. The sure-footed mountain ponies began to prick up their ears and step daintily, avoiding the loose rocks and stones in their path.

Then suddenly, as though without warning, they were out on a pebble-strewn ledge, the towering mountain on one side, on the other a sheer, terrifying drop to a deep ravine. Water flowed, somewhere, far below, a musical tinkle that barely reached their ears.

Of course Mollie, Irene, and Stella—most especially Mollie—were accustomed to meeting and conquering danger. Meg and Lota, too, were Western girls and adventures of this sort were, for them, all in the day's work.

But with Carolyn Cooper it was different. She had been protected and sheltered all her life

—more or less of an 'inside girl.' But there was a strain of the adventurer in her, nevertheless, and she passed this test like a thoroughbred. She gave her pony his head, shut her eyes and waited for what might happen.

Presently she heard Meg's cry of triumph. Her pony set his feet in less gingerly fashion on the trail and presently Carolyn dared to open her eyes.

Sure enough, what had been scarcely more than a cowpath had widened out into a fairly broad trail. Mollie and Meg galloped on in advance, whooping and waving their quirts wildly.

Suddenly Meg cried out in a changed tone. Her pony danced to one side of the trail, reared wildly, threatening to fall over backward upon his rider.

In the path, almost under the pony's feet, lay coiled a deadly, hissing copperhead snake!

CHAPTER XV

A TREACHEROUS TRAIL

The Outdoor Girls spurred forward. But Irene Moore was the first to see and understand Meg's danger.

Like a flash, the girl acted. Her new quirt was lifted and came down with a hissing swish. As the coiled reptile darted forward, the knife-like edge of the quirt caught it clean behind its ugly head, severing the head from the body.

There was a tremendous thrashing among the rocks and bushes for a moment, then all was quiet.

As the girls gathered about Irene to praise and congratulate her, the heroine of the occasion lifted her quirt and looked at it wonderingly.

"I don't know how I did it," she said. "I think it's the first time I ever hit anything I aimed at in my life!"

Meg laughed and gave Irene a big hug that nearly lifted her from her pony's back.

"That was well done," she said, a little breathlessly. "Your aim is improving, Irene!"

"It was just luck," the girl insisted. "I slashed away and was lucky enough to hit it, that's all."

They had to leave it at that, for Irene resolutely refused to accept any praise for her heroism. But they were sobered by the incident and were careful to take no more chances that day.

Days followed, days crammed full of fun and treading so fast on the heels of each other that the girls lost track of them.

Of course the Outdoor Girls from the East had sent home telegrams announcing their safe arrival at New Moon Ranch, and then they forwarded letters, telling of what a grand time they were having. Now they waited eagerly for letters in return.

During this time Daniel Tower seemed in the best of spirits. He frequently went with the girls on their jaunts into the woods or out on the prairie and never tired of telling stories of his lumber camps to an interested audience.

Seeing him apparently so happy and contented, his old self again, the memory of Black and Tisson gradually faded from the minds of Lota and Meg and they gave themselves over whole-souledly to the fun of the hour.

"I think this is the very nicest place we ever came to," Carolyn Cooper remarked.

They were out on one of their numerous hikes. Now it was mid-day and they rested near a stream while they ate the excellent lunch put up for them by Mrs. Ackerson.

"It's practically ideal," said Mollie, and added, as though thinking aloud: "I'm making the very most of every day."

The girls turned to her curiously. Stella's lazy chuckle was more eloquent than words.

"You speak as though this might be the last chance you'd ever have for an outing, Mollie dear. How come?"

"Did I sound that way?" said Mollie, a little crossly. "I certainly didn't mean to!"

There was silence for a few moments while the thoughts of all the girls were busy with just one thing—Mollie and her pending romance.

"Anyway," murmured Lota, with apparent irrelevance, "this *is* a romantic place. That story Uncle Dan told about Todd Davis, and how the New Moon came to get its name, for instance. What could be sweeter?"

"Don't be silly!" Mollie got to her feet so quickly that the lunch basket overturned, spilling out some jelly sandwiches and biscuits.

"Where are you going?" asked Irene, as their leader turned sharply away into the woods.

"For a walk," said Mollie, and added as an explanation for deserting them: "Guess I ate too much chicken. Want to exercise it off."

"Well, be careful *where* you walk," Meg cautioned. "That trail you're on is a strange one. You don't want to get lost."

"I know I don't," said Mollie shortly, and continued on her way.

"She's mad!" said Lota rather unnecessarily, as she regathered the biscuits and slipped them back in the basket. "I suppose we really shouldn't tease her so."

"But she's mean never to tell us anything about her perfectly lovely romance," Carolyn protested, beginning on her third piece of cake. "She must think we're blind not to see the way things are going."

"I suppose she thinks it's none of our business," Stella suggested. "And maybe she may be right!"

"Watch out!" cried Lota as Stella stood up, overturning a pickle jar that stood at her feet. "You girls must like to see me work," she added plaintively. "Can't *any one* sit still?"

"I think I'll trot along after Mollie," said Stella. "I've had a little too much chicken myself, I guess. And besides, it occurs to me that the girl needs watching."

"Who? Mollie?" giggled Lota. "What an idea!"

"She hasn't made off with the family plate yet," protested Meg gravely. "What makes you think she should be watched?"

Stella treated them all to a look of scorn.

"You know as well as I do that Mollie is so absent-minded these days she's apt to do anything. If she saw a lion or a tiger or something like that, she'd be just as apt as not to go up to it and pet it and call it pussy."

"She'd very soon find out her mistake," suggested Meg.

"When it was too late." Stella paused at the edge of the woods.

"Any one coming with me?" she wanted to know.

Carolyn got up and stretched resignedly.

"Well—if I must——"

"Exercise will do you good," teased Irene. "I bet you've gained ten pounds since you came here, Carolyn."

"Ten pounds!" cried Carolyn indignantly. "Next thing you know, the girl will be telling me I'm fat!"

"Exercise will help," repeated Irene, contentedly nibbling a bread and butter sandwich.

"Perhaps, after a while, though, you'd better start rolling."

Carolyn looked for a moment as though she contemplated violence.

"Such a statement should be treated with the scorn it deserves," she said at length and, with a toss of her head, marched off after Stella.

But though the two girls had delayed only a few moments in following Mollie, they could not, for some unaccountable reason, overtake her. They called to her and, receiving no answer, became genuinely alarmed.

"Maybe she has wandered off along some other path," Stella suggested.

"But there hasn't been any," Carolyn objected. She looked about her with a puzzled frown. On both sides the woods pressed close in upon them. Only before and behind them was the trail faintly marked. It seemed practically certain that Mollie must have traveled this identical path only a short time before. Yet—where was she?

They began to run, calling to Mollie as they went. Still no answer.

Suddenly Stella, who was a little ahead of Carolyn, cried out and flung herself violently backward.

"Hang on to me!" she begged. "I—I'm slipping!"

As Stella's weight sagged upon her, Carolyn showed presence of mind. She braced herself against the trunk of a tree and tugged with all her might. Stella pulled too and in a moment she was sitting safe and sound in the grass at the side of the trail.

"What," demanded Carolyn, panting, "does it all mean?"

Stella pushed her hair back from her forehead with hands that trembled.

"It means," she said, "that I almost fell over a cliff, that's all!"

Carolyn stared stupidly.

"But there isn't any cliff!" she cried.

For answer Stella got to her hands and knees, crawled forward cautiously, and separated the heavy foliage that obstructed the view of what lay beyond. Then she beckoned to Carolyn.

"Look!" she said quietly.

Carolyn crept forward till she was beside Stella, then looked through the hole in the undergrowth.

She gasped, and involuntarily drew back.

"Why, it—it *is* a cliff!" she cried. For before them the ground dropped suddenly a sheer hundred feet or more to the rock-filled bed of a

stream. A plunge down the face of the ravine, studded as it was with stubbly bushes and sharp-pointed rocks, would almost certainly mean death.

Carolyn drew in her breath sharply.

"You—you mean you—almost fell into that?" she questioned.

Stella nodded.

"I put out my foot," she said, "and suddenly there was nothing beneath me. It—was a pretty bad feeling."

"I should say so!" Carolyn was awed. "What I don't understand is how you were able to save yourself."

"Well, I'd slowed down, anyway," Stella explained. "It looked like the end of the trail to me with these heavy bushes obscuring it, and I was—sort of, feeling my way."

"Lucky for you—" began Carolyn, and paused abruptly.

Glancing at her Stella saw such a look of fear leap to the face of the other girl that she herself was startled.

"What's the matter?" she cried, adding with quick solicitude: "You didn't strain yourself when you caught me, did you—your ankle or——"

But Carolyn impatiently shook her head.

"I'm all right," she cried, jumping to her feet. "I was—thinking about Mollie!"

"Mollie!" Stella stared vaguely for a moment, then seized the other girl's arm in a grip that hurt. "You mean that—that's what may have happened to—Mollie?" she asked.

Even before Carolyn nodded she knew what the answer would be. She turned to the bushes again, pulling them apart roughly.

"Hold me," she directed the other girl. "I'm going to have a look along the face of this cliff!"

So Carolyn held her feet while Stella stretched far out over the terrifying drop.

At first she could see nothing. Then her eyes were caught by a little speck of white far below. Was that a formation of the white rock? Or was it—something else?

CHAPTER XVI

OVER THE RAVINE

As Stella Sibley asked herself the question, there came to her ears a faint, far cry, wafted eerily up to her on the wings of the summer breeze.

Carolyn heard it, too, and, in her surprise, almost forgot to hang on to Stella's feet.

"Hold on!" cried poor Stella, gripping the clumps of grass with desperate fingers. "Do you want me, too, to fall down there?"

Carolyn tightened her grip and, at Stella's direction, helped to pull her back once more to safety.

"Listen!" said Stella. Her face was pale but she had never thought more clearly in her life. "I can't be sure, but I think Mollie is about three-quarters of the way down the face of this cliff. There's hope in the fact that she can still call to us——"

"Yes, yes!" cried Carolyn, wringing her hands distractedly. "But what are we going to do?"

"I'm trying to tell you!" Stella' voice had

grown sharp with anxiety. "We can't make our way down the cliff this way. We'd only fall and break our necks, and that wouldn't help Mollie any."

"Then what?"

"We've got to find another way down the cliff," Stella answered with determination. "There must be one—and the quicker we find it the better."

"If we could go back and get help from the ranch——"

"Not time," Stella interrupted, tight-lipped. "If I'm not mistaken Mollie is actually hanging down there, caught, probably, in some bushes as she fell. In that case we've got to get to her right away. If the bushes should give way——"

"Don't!" implored Carolyn. "I can't bear to think of it!"

"Then come on and help me find some way to that ravine below there. Or," she turned to the panic-stricken girl, "you may stay here if you like and I'll go on alone. I'm not afraid."

Carolyn straightened up and her face flushed. "Neither am I!" she said.

Together they broke through the heavy undergrowth, striving to find a way down the side of the cliff that was not entirely suicidal.

They searched until they were almost desper-

ate. Then Carolyn found a place where a descent might be attempted without certain loss of life.

The slope here was more gradual, and it was so thickly dotted with rock that they might hope for sufficient toeholds to bring them safely to the foot of the ravine.

"We'll try it," said Stella. "If we are careful we ought to be able to make it all right. If you feel yourself slipping, for goodness' sake, grab hold of these bushes, Carolyn. They don't look like much but they'll be a good deal better than nothing, in a pinch."

Carolyn said nothing. She merely nodded and gripped her courage with both hands.

"Where Stella Sibley can go, *I* can go!" she told herself fiercely. "Besides, it's Mollie's life that is at stake!"

Stella let herself over the side of the cliff, cautiously feeling with her foot for crevices in the rock. Then downward, inch by inch, sometimes hanging almost entirely by her hands while she groped for a foothold, sometimes slipping, sometimes sliding down the slippery face of the rock, but always saving herself, somehow, from plunging to her death on the rocks far below.

Carolyn followed, frightened to the very heart, but carrying on stanchly, nevertheless.

And that is the height of courage, to out-stare staring fear and prove yourself its master.

A quarter of the way down—almost a half. The hands of both girls were scratched and bleeding. Their faces were red and swollen with effort. Their clothes were torn, their knees fairly flayed from rubbing against the rocks.

Still the thought of Mollie urged them on, gave them fresh courage. If the bushes that held her should give way——

With that thought they gritted their teeth and went on doggedly, inch by inch.

At last Stella looked below and sent up a cry of encouragement to Carolyn.

"We're doing it!" she cried. "We aren't far from the bottom now. Hang on, Carolyn."

"My fingers are—funny!" gasped Carolyn. "I can't seem to feel with them any more."

"Just a little way farther," Stella urged. "*Make* them feel!"

Downward, downward, until at last Stella felt sharp rocks beneath her feet and knew she had reached the bottom. She clung to a clump of bushes and looked about her warily.

Even as she did so she heard a cry from above her head and looked up to see Carolyn throw up her hands and slide backward, slipping and scrambling wildly.

Lucky for Carolyn that Stella was near enough to catch her. As it was, she felt herself caught and held in a strong, reassuring grip.

"Oh, I didn't mean to!" Carolyn cried, clinging to the stronger girl. "I did my best to hold on, but my fingers wouldn't."

"Never mind, we're all right now," Stella reminded her. She took a handkerchief from her belt and wiped her bleeding fingers impatiently. "We'll have to rest a minute to—to get ready for the hardest task of all," she said.

There was a narrow stream of water running among the rocks at the foot of the ravine and in this the girls quickly laved their hands and faces.

Much refreshed and a little more confident, they finally started out to find Mollie—if indeed, that white spot on the face of the cliff had been Mollie! They were in terror every step they took for fear they would come across something there on the rocks that they would not want to look at.

At last they heard the cry again and, looking up, saw the leader of the Outdoor Girls.

There she was, not twenty feet over their heads! She was clinging to the rock. Her clothing had caught in the scrubby bushes. Only that little patch of brushwood growing

among the rocks had saved her from a terrible death.

Even now, the other girls realized, she was far from safe.

They made their way to a spot just below the rock to which the trapped girl clung.

"Mollie!" Stella called brokenly. "We—thought——"

"Never mind," said Mollie cheerfully. "You came and that's the main thing. If you could just manage to give me a hand before this bush breaks——"

"Is it breaking?" cried Carolyn.

"Either it is or my clothes are. Anyway, I can't hold on much longer."

"All right. Just a minute," said Stella. We'll get up to you somehow."

"But how?" asked Carolyn.

Stella hadn't the slightest idea, but she tried to appear confident for Mollie's sake. They *must* get up to her!

She studied the face of the cliff. At that point it was almost perpendicular; scarcely a toe or finger hold anywhere.

Only one thing gave her hope. Only an inch or two below the spot where Mollie clung was a jutting, pointed rock.

"If I had a rope," thought Stella, her heart

beating high with eager hope, "I might with luck be able to fling it over the pointed rock.

"Then I could climb up, hand over hand." She spoke the last words aloud and Carolyn looked at her anxiously.

"What are you talking about?" she demanded.

Stella beat with her hand upon the hard face of the rock.

"I need a rope!" she cried desperately. "But where am I going to get one——"

"I know!" Carolyn ran forward and picked up an end of tough vine that had been caught among the rocks. "Mightn't this do, Stella?"

"Just the thing!" cried the other girl. She picked up the vine and tugged at the end of it. It uncoiled from among the rocks, for all the world like a long snake.

"Pray that it will be long enough," said Stella, half crying. "Carolyn, *pray* that it will be long enough!"

At last came a jerk. The vine had unwound as far as it would go. Stella took out her pocketknife, without which no Outdoor Girl ever traveled far, and cut the vine that was to help Mollie to safety.

All this time Mollie had been finding it harder and harder to cling to her precarious perch.

The bushes that held her were pulling away at the roots. Her fingers, clinging to the rock, were numbed and aching. The time would come, and soon, when she would have to let go.

She watched Stella's preparation with desperate eagerness. She saw at once what the girl had in mind, but she knew also that it would be little short of a miracle if she accomplished it.

Rip. Another root gave way. Mollie clung tighter with her numb fingers and prayed.

Stella stood back from the cliff face, took careful aim, used all her strength, and flung the improvised rope upward. It fell a good two feet below its mark!

"It's too light!" groaned Stella. "The wind takes it."

Mollie cried in sudden desperation:

"Tie it about a stone and throw it to me. I can catch it."

"You can't hold on with one hand——"

"Throw it to me!" Mollie interrupted impatiently. "Hurry. I—I'm nearly all in!"

With fingers that trembled, Stella wrapped the vine about a long stone and tied it securely. Then she threw it upward toward Mollie.

Once, twice, three times——

Mollie, clinging now with only one hand, felt

the cloth of her riding breeches give—and set her teeth.

One more chance! If she missed then——

"Do your best this time, Mollie," said Stella in an agonized voice. "Catch!"

Mollie watched carefully and as the stone came hurtling toward her, touched it with her fingers, gripped it.

"All right—so far," she muttered. "Now if I can—make a knot in it——"

A nightmare! Trying to untie the vine from about the stone, nearly dropping it several times; then making a loop in it with one numb, trembling hand while with all the power of her will, she forced the other to cling still to the rock.

The vine was slippery, slimy like a snake. She must drop it— She could not tie a knot with one hand, her left hand——

Ah, she was getting it! If the bushes held for a moment more—just a little moment more——

Below her the girls looked up with agonized eyes. Their helpless hands itched to take the vine from her to tie a knot in it, to release her from the nightmare of that terrible task!

Then——

"It's done!" cried Mollie, and they had never

heard anything like the triumph in that voice.

"Slip it over the rock—quick!" begged Carolyn.

Mollie leaned forward to obey. But as she did so, the bushes that had so far held her poised above death gave way entirely. She cried out as her supporting hand was jerked from the crevice of the rock.

But as she plunged downward the looped vine caught over the rock. Mollie was pulled up short, her fingers still gripping the tough vine.

She lay flat against the surface of the rock for a moment, regaining her strength.

THE LOOPED VINE CAUGHT OVER THE ROCK.

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CHAPTER XVII

UNWELCOME VISITORS

Mollie Billette's head swam. She felt dizzy and sick. Only the frantic pleading of her friends kept her from losing consciousness.

She roused herself, still clinging to the rope-like vine and slowly, painfully, gaining foot-holds in the rock wherever she could, let herself down to the rocky floor of the ravine.

There she sank down, exhausted, all but unconscious, into the arms of the sobbing girls.

"I'll—be—all right—in a—minute—" she assured them, and closed her eyes.

The slapping of ice-cold water on her face roused Mollie from her faint. She was still dizzy and when she tried to get up her head reeled. There was a good deal of noise, she thought, almost resentfully. When her head ached so it was a pity people couldn't be quiet——

"You lie still," a voice said in her ear. "Everything's all right now. The boys from the ranch have come."

She recognized the voice as belonging to Stella. Oh, yes, Stella had thrown her the rope —Stella and Carolyn between them had saved her life. It was coming back slowly—she must try to thank them——

"You lie still!" said Stella's voice again and Mollie obeyed. Really it was much pleasanter to lie still than to do anything else. Her head was still pretty dizzy——

After a considerable time, Mollie decided that she must have fainted again. Only this time when she came to herself she was much more comfortable.

She was, actually, in bed at the ranch house. She opened her eyes and saw Ming Wah coming into the room with a bowl of steaming broth.

Mollie sat up in bed.

"Give me that bowl of soup," she cried. "I'm starving!"

There was a giggle behind Ming Wah and somebody said:

"I guess she won't die for a little while, yet!"

Then all the other girls came in and spoiled and petted and praised their leader until she declared she would never be the same girl again!

The soup did taste good, and it had a marvelous effect upon Mollie. She insisted upon getting up and in a short time was so much

her old self that the nearly fatal accident of the cliff was almost forgotten.

As for Mollie herself, she was very glad to forget about the accident as quickly as possible. She asked only one question, and that was concerning the manner of the rescue from the narrow valley at the base of the cliff.

"We were worried when the three of you stayed away so long," Irene explained, after expatiating on the part Stella and Carolyn had played, "and went in search of you. We found you, all right——"

"Almost fell down the cliff ourselves doing it," Meg interpolated with a wry face. "Reckon that's the most treacherous spot in the country."

"Then we called down to the girls that we would ride hot-foot back to the ranch and bring some of the boys to the rescue," Lota took up the story.

"Which we did," added Meg. "Dippy knew of a roundabout trail that led down to the valley gradually and we took that, riding as fast as we could. And that's about all——"

"Except that we found you all right," finished Lota. "Dippy took you up on the saddle in front of him, Mollie—you had passed out completely by that time—and Buffer and Ike took charge of the other two girls."

"Which brings us back to a safe and happy present with no lives lost," added Lota airily.

"Just the same, Stella and Carolyn risked their lives for me," Mollie said soberly, "and I shan't forget it in a hurry. Thanks, girls!"

"Oh, that wasn't anything!" cried Stella quickly. She always found herself greatly embarrassed by thanks. "All—all in the day's work, you know, Mollie. Wasn't it, Carolyn?"

"Of course!" cried Carolyn, strutting a little. "After this, scaling cliffs will be a mere bagatelle to us, won't it, Stella? Only an insignificant incident, as it were."

"Heavens, how did she get that way?" cried Lota, in mock alarm. "Feel her pulse, somebody. Maybe she's sick!"

So ended the incident that had so nearly been a tragedy and, by tacit consent, the girls never again referred to it during their stay at New Moon Ranch.

They soon had other things to think about.

Mr. Tower told them one evening at dinner that he must ride out early the next morning on business.

"I've had my vacation," he told them jokingly. "Now it's time I got to work."

"Where are you going, Uncle Dan?" asked Meg quickly.

"Got to look over the timberlands, girl," said the lumberman. "Want to make plans for an early cutting in the fall. Think you youngsters can get on without me for a little while?" he added, sweeping the ring of interested young faces about the table with his twinkling glance.

"Reckon we can, but we don't want to," Lota said affectionately. "When are you figuring on getting back, Uncle Dan?"

"May be two days, may be two weeks," the old lumberman told her. "You'd just better expect me when I get here. And in the meantime," he added, earnestly, "I don't want you youngsters wanderin' around alone. You take a couple o' the boys along on your jaunts——"

"Oh, Uncle Dan——"

But the lumberman cut short Lota's protest with a curt gesture. The Outdoor Girls realized then that Daniel Tower was not a man to change his mind easily, once it was made up.

"That's orders," he said soberly. "I've got the responsibility for you young ladies, and I'm taking no chances. Now mind you do as I say!"

There was no disregarding this ultimatum. In the days that followed the girls never dared stir from the ranch afoot or on horseback with-

out an escort of one or two of the boys from the ranch.

However, they found the cowboys agreeable company once they got to know them and after a while were more glad than sorry to have them along on their jaunts.

Then, one day, when returning from a long gallop over the prairie, they found Mr. and Mrs. Ackerson and Dippy, the foreman, in excited conversation with two strange men.

"Wonder what's the matter now!" cried Meg, and spurred up her horse.

She reined in her pony close to the ranch-house veranda and swung to the ground. The other girls, galloping close at her heels, followed her example.

Suddenly Meg paused and drew in her breath sharply. She knew those two men!

They were the same pair who had threatened her guardian in Deepdale, the same who had followed him to Chicago, who had, apparently, continued to follow him to New Moon Ranch.

Because of them Daniel Tower had armed himself for almost the first time in his life. These two men were Black and Tisson!

Filled with anger, Meg ran up on the porch. Lota followed quickly. The other girls fol-

lowed more slowly, wondering what Meg's evident perturbation was about.

"What do you want?" Meg demanded coldly.

The two men faced about, looking impatiently at the girls.

"None of your business," said the taller of the two men, scowling. "No one was talking to you!"

"No, but *I'm* speaking to *you!*" Meg retorted, her head high. "This is our home. We live here and I want to know what you are doing on our front porch!"

"Who are you?" demanded the other man. His companion answered the question before Meg could speak.

"They are Dan Tower's wards," he said abruptly.

At this point Dippy, the foreman, came forward. His hard brown hands were clenched, his fighting jaw was thrust forward belligerently.

"These fellers wants to know will we let them see the ranch papers, Miss Meg!" he said. His eyes, under heavy brows, glinted fiercely at the intruders. "They ain't got their nerve with them, nor nothin' like that! Oh, no!"

"Ranch papers?" It was Lota who repeated this, wondering. "Just what do they mean by that?"

The two men, who had been fidgeting under the foreman's fierce glare, turned to the girls.

"All we want is a look at the ranch records," said the taller of the two, whom they afterward came to identify as Tisson. His tone had become suddenly affable, almost wheedling. "That isn't much to ask and it won't take a minute of your time——"

"Uncle Dan is away just now," Meg cut in shortly. "We couldn't possibly let you look at ranch records or anything else until he gets back and gives his consent——"

"Which he'd never do, anyway," Lota added decidedly. "We know him too well for that."

"While the boss is gone, I have charge of this house and all that's in it!" Mr. Ackerson thrust himself forward. "You have everything to say out on the ranch, Dippy," he added, looking up at the grim and determined foreman; "but here at the house I'm boss and don't you forgit it! Here you" he added, with more spirit than the girls would have given him credit for, "git out now! Git!"

"An' make it snappy!" added Dippy, clenching and unclenching his hands.

"All right," growled Tisson. "We'll get out —but we'll come back again."

"And we'll make your boss eat crow yet, before we're through," added Black.

At the threat Ackerson and Dippy made a concerted lunge forward—which considerably hastened the departure of the two men.

Naturally, this visit mystified the Outdoor Girls. But it more than mystified Meg and Lota. The twins were sincerely worried on their guardian's account.

"I wish Uncle Dan were here," Lota said that night when she climbed into bed beside her sister. "I feel as though he should know that those two men have followed him to the ranch."

"I wish we could find out just what they want," said Meg, with a sigh. "This mystery is beginning to get on my nerves!"

It was the very next day that the twins received a clue to the mysterious actions of Black and Tisson.

The start of the adventure was ordinary enough. The girls had stumbled upon a new trail through the mountains the day before and all were eager to find where it led.

This time three of the ranch boys accompanied them, Buffer, Ike, and Bill.

They found the new trail and followed it down into a dark ravine guarded on either side by

steep, jagged-edged cliffs. It was a fascinating trail, and the girls followed it recklessly wherever it might lead, pausing now and then to inspect great moss-covered bowlders that, here and there, almost choked the trail. By investigation, they learned that under these bowlders could often be found the most fascinating little green lizards.

They discovered one or two caves, too, jagged openings in the face of the cliff. It seemed that the girls could not weary of peering into these and wondering what lay behind the dark shadows.

"Best not to get too curious about those caves," Buffer told them. "Apt to find somethin' in them you don't expect—mebbe a rattler or something. No sir, ain't so safe, meddlin' with them caves!"

After a while they had lunch, perched on the flat top of one of the moss-grown bowlders, while the ponies grazed contentedly near by.

The other Outdoor Girls noticed that Mollie was very thoughtful, eating little and not answering, sometimes, even when she was spoken to.

Meg and Lota exchanged glances and the latter leaned close to her twin to ask confidentially:

"Haven't had any answer, yet, to that letter we sent to Deepdale?"

Meg shook her head.

"Not yet. But we ought to get word from the boys any day now——"

"And then," added Lota, with a chuckle, "won't we have fun with Mollie!"

Irene jumped suddenly to her feet, holding out her hands, palm upward.

"It's raining!" she cried. "Oh, my goodness, we'll be soaked!"

CHAPTER XVIII

IN THE CAVE

THERE was nothing for it but to run to the shelter of one of the nearest caves. A rain in that country was more than a rain, it was a torrent.

Buffer held aside the bushes from the cave mouth and motioned to the girls into the interior.

"Hurry up," he said impatiently, as they hesitated. "'Less you really *want* to git wet!"

"But you said there might be rattlers——"

"They won't be in here," replied Buffer. "Anyways, looks like we got to take a chance."

The girls were not sure but what getting wet was preferable to taking a chance of meeting a rattlesnake, but they could not very well stand out in the pouring rain to argue the question. The cave, once they were inside, was cool and dry, at any rate. It was a fairly high cave, too, so that they were forced to stoop only a little as they felt their way along its slippery bottom.

A short distance from the entrance, Mollie paused.

"No use going in too far," she said. "As long as we get out of the rain, that's all we want——"

"And we aren't actually aching to step on a rattlesnake," giggled Irene, who was next in line. It was rather a nervous giggle and Irene clutched Mollie's arm for moral support.

"Here comes the rain," said Lota, from somewhere farther down the dark tunnel. "Just listen to it!"

"Thunder and lightning, too!" cried Carolyn, as she clapped hands to ears. "Goodness, what a storm!"

"The poor ponies will get all wet," mourned Stella. "What a pity we couldn't have found shelter for them, too."

"Suppose we might have rode down the trail a bit and picked up Sutter's cabin," Ike ruminated. "There's a shed there where we might a tethered the hosses."

"Likely won't rain much," Buffer returned. "Anyways," he added, with a chuckle, "no one knows just who that bit o' timberland belongs to. If it ain't Dan Tower's, then we're apt to find ourselves run off at the end of a shotgun——"

At this point somebody, probably Ike, poked the garrulous cowboy in the ribs.

"Shut up, you goof!" hissed the owner of the elbow.

But the warning came too late. Lota said quickly:

"But I thought all that land around Sutter's cabin belonged to Uncle Dan!"

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence in the cave. Then Lota added sharply:

"Doesn't it?"

"Well, now, miss," said poor Buffer apologetically, "I didn't aim to let no cat out o' the bag, so to speak——"

"But you have, just the same," Meg reminded him. "So you might as well tell us what you meant first as last."

"Well, the fact is, there's been some sort o' dispute over that there portion of the timberland your Uncle Dan bought," said Buffer uncomfortably. "He thought he had a clear title to it, sure enough, or he never would have bought it——"

"But *hasn't* he a clear title?" Meg demanded breathlessly.

"There is folks who says he ain't, Miss Meg," Buffer returned reluctantly. "But your Uncle

Dan, he swears he owns every bit of that timber from Mason's creek to the K O Ranch, and I reckon your Uncle Dan, he knows what he's talkin' about."

"But I don't understand," said Lota. "Uncle Dan bought this land from Todd Davis——"

But here Ike interrupted her.

"Since Buffer's been such a goof as to let the cat out o' the bag——"

Here a loud snort from Buffer.

"You might as well know the hull truth o' the matter. When Todd Davis sold out he didn't only sell to your Uncle Dan. There was others interested in the timberlands, and the boss, he didn't git in right at the start, you see. But Daniel Tower was interested in these here woods from the minute he seen them——"

"We know," put in Lota. "He'd set his heart on owning the whole tract."

"Yes'm," agreed Ike. "So he started to buy back Todd Davis' property from those others."

"And he did!" said Meg, with conviction. "We remember how happy he was when he said he owned every square inch of Todd Davis' timberlands. Don't we, Lota?"

"He gave us a party to celebrate," agreed Lota. "He was certain enough of his title then."

"Reckon he was," agreed Ike soberly. "But since then there's been a sort of general mix-up, as you might say."

"Won't come to nothing, though," Buffer prophesied cheerfully. "Daniel Tower, he's a man of business. Can't many people fool him, let me tell you. If he says he's got a clear title to those timberlands, here's one cowboy's goin' to believe him, no mistake!"

But though the twins felt grateful to Buffer for his loyalty, they were by no means so sure as he pretended to be that their Uncle Dan had not been tricked in that deal over the timberlands.

However, nothing more was said about it just then and, finding that the shower was over, they left the dubious shelter of the cave, collected their scattered ponies, and once more turned their faces toward the ranch.

The Bronson twins were very grave and thoughtful on that ride back home and once Lota whispered to Meg:

"Do you remember Uncle Dan said he had staked about everything he owned on this bit of timberland?"

Lota nodded moodily.

"If anything goes wrong, I'm afraid it will just about ruin him," she said, and added,

with a quick flirt of her quirt that stung her pony to a rearing protest: "I wish we could help him, Lota. We've got to help him some way!"

They cantered to the top of one of the small ridges that flecked the prairie.

Suddenly Meg drew rein and pointed with her quirt. From that vantage point they were afforded a full view of the ranch house and its surrounding buildings. On the railing of the porch were perched two figures.

Strangers?

As the girls gazed, they were not so sure. There was something familiar, even at this distance, about those two! Lota gave a little excited cry and clapped hand to mouth.

"Meg! Can it be the boys?"

"Shouldn't wonder!" said Meg, sparkling. "Let's find out!"

They galloped over the prairie well in advance of the others of the party. As they approached, the figures detached themselves from the rail.

There was no longer any doubt as to their identity. Clem Field and Roy Anderson—the Bronson twins' surprise for Mollie!

"Whoop—ee!" shouted Lota joyfully. "Now, won't we have fun!"

Meg and Lota waited until they were almost

upon the two grinning boys, then reined in their ponies and leaped to the ground.

"Look out!" cried Meg. "We're going to hug you!"

"Can't make us mad that way," chuckled the boys, and received the jolly twins with open arms.

The next moment the rest of the cavalcade came thundering down upon them. Lota clung to Clem's arm, Meg to Roy's. They watched with eager eyes to see how Mollie would take it!

For once the black-eyed Mollie was taken by surprise, completely off her guard. She turned red, then white, then red again in a manner that would have made her furious could she have guessed how completely it gave her away.

Clem ran to one side of her horse, Roy to the other. Mollie smiled at them, and, disdaining aid, leaped from her pony.

"Hello! where did *you* come from?" was her brief greeting.

"Dropped down from an airplane, via parachute lane," replied the grinning Roy.

"Yes, that's the way we do our daily dozen," laughed Clem.

Mollie chuckled.

"Well, anyway it's nice to have you here," she said. For the life of them the girls could not

make out whether she spoke to Clem or Roy—or both! "Did any one invite you, or did you just come?"

"These terrible Bronson twins invited them without saying a word to anybody," Stella cried. "I've just made Lota confess!"

"A mean trick, I call it," laughed Carolyn. "Just think of the pleasure we might have looked forward to!"

"Good! Somebody's glad to see us, anyway," laughed Clem.

He now took possession of Mollie, carrying her off to a corner of the porch where he might engage her in private conversation. Roy, rather glumly, permitted himself to be monopolized by the other girls.

Only Irene refused to join the animated, laughing group. She perched on the porch railing, switching the shining new quirt about her riding boot. Now and then, as though against her will, her eyes strayed to the corner where Clem talked and laughed with Mollie.

Stella, watching her chum closely, while pretending not to look her way at all, was filled with slow wonderment.

"Now what," she thought, "is the matter with Irene?"

CHAPTER XIX

THE THIEF

STELLA SIBLEY'S wonder concerning Irene Moore gradually spread to the other Outdoor Girls as they noticed Irene's incomprehensible behavior. And they wondered still more when Roy Anderson stretched his long legs, ambled over to Irene, and asked her to take a stroll with him.

"Delighted!" said Irene, looking more like herself than she had at any time since the boys' arrival. "I'll show you about the ranch if you like."

Were the interested onlookers mistaken, or did Mollie raise her head to look after the vanishing pair with more than ordinary interest as they strolled off? At any rate, she did look after them, and there was the slightest pucker of a frown between her brows before she turned to Clem and laughed again at something amusing he said.

"Now if you will tell me what *that* means," murmured Carolyn, "I'll be very much obliged."

"I know one thing it means, anyway," chuckled Lota. "That is that we're due to have considerable fun out here at the ranch during the next few days, with Clem and Roy trying to cut each other out. Almost anything may happen."

"And probably nothing will," said Stella pessimistically. "Mollie is the most aggravating girl! If she would only make up her mind and put us all out of this suspense——"

"To say nothing of Clem and Roy," drawled Meg.

"She'll make up her mind all right," said Carolyn dreamily. "Just wait till we have one good clear moonlight night——"

"And it will be all over but the rice and old shoes," chuckled Lota. "Well, maybe you're right. We'll wait and see, anyway."

"The only thing I blame you and Meg for," Carolyn complained, "is for not inviting Hal Duckworth and that nice, shy boy, Dick Blossom, at the same time you did Clem and Roy. Just think of the fun you bad twins could have with Dick!"

Meg looked at her pityingly.

"It's plain to see you know nothing of matchmaking, Carolyn," she said. "With those two extra boys about, Mollie wouldn't have had a

chance to make up her mind. They'd have been bouncing up at the most inconvenient times—you know how boys are—just when Roy and Clem were proposing maybe—and then where would you be?"

"Having a good time, anyway," replied Carolyn ruefully. "The way things look just now we won't see much either of Mollie—or Irene—while the boys are here. What ails Irene, anyway?" she asked.

"Goodness knows," said Stella, and added, with a giggle: "Maybe it's the romantic atmosphere of the ranch. It got Todd Davis, you know. Maybe it will get Irene, too!"

"Oh, horrors, say not such!" cried Carolyn. "It's bad enough with one lovelorn Outdoor Girl. We don't want any more!"

"It probably isn't a case of what we want," said Stella, with a sigh. "It's what we get. But I must say," indignantly, "I would never have thought it of Irene."

However, the very next morning something happened that robbed Mollie's romance of first place in the interest of the Outdoor Girls.

Directly after breakfast, the girls went over to the corral to order the ponies saddled for a long jaunt over the prairie in the direction of the K O Ranch.

Returning to the house for lunch baskets and other paraphernalia, they found Dippy and Mr. Ackerson engaged in earnest conversation. Mrs. Ackerson had gone to the woods to gather herbs for medicine. They caught a phrase that instantly roused their interest.

"Trouble in the timber region——"

The Bronson twins turned to the foreman.

"What kind of trouble, Dippy?" asked Meg breathlessly.

"Is anything wrong with Uncle Dan?" Lota demanded, almost in the same breath.

Dippy turned to them after exchanging a quick look with Mr. Ackerson.

"That's what me and Mr. Ackerson would like to find out," he said. "We're ridin' out with the boys this morning, if you don't mind lookin' after the ranch for a spell——"

"Of course we'll stay here and look after things the best we can," Lota said. "But can't you tell us what's wrong in the timber region?"

Dippy shook his head and spat thoughtfully upon the ground. Mr. Ackerson remained silent, looking worried and ineffectual.

"All we know, miss," said the foreman at last, "is that one of the boys from the K O Ranch came ridin' over this morning to give us a tip that things was gettin' hot for the boss.

We thought that he might need us; so that's the reason we want to ride out this mornin' to sort o' look over the land, as you might say."

"But there's a telephone between the shacks up in the timber region and the ranch house," Lota protested. "If Uncle Dan is in trouble, all he has to do is call up here."

Here Mr. Ackerson spoke up.

"You ought to know your uncle well enough, Miss Lota, to be sure he wouldn't telephone for help except he was forced to the last ditch," he said.

Meg looked up at this and nodded briskly.

"You're right there, he wouldn't," she said. "Well, you boys go along. We'll take care of things while you're gone."

"We'll leave a couple of the boys behind," said Dippy, as he swung himself into the saddle, "to sort of look after the ranch."

"And up here you'll have Ming Wah," added Mr. Ackerson.

The girls chuckled at the thought of grinning Ming Wah, the cook, in the rôle of protector! "I've give him special orders," added Mr. Ackerson, "not to let any one go nigh my desk."

"Well, he ought to make a good guardian," joked Clem, who had come up in time to hear the last of the conversation.

But the odd little man with the bald head and the ineffectual manner did not smile. Instead he nodded seriously:

"He will!" he said, and rode off after Dippy.

"Well, this seems to sort of gum up our party," said Roy, as he sat down disconsolately on the porch steps. "I suppose we'll have to stick around and guard the ranch——"

"Along with Ming Wah!" chuckled Clem. "Oh, well, if the girls can stand it, I guess we can!"

However, despite the fact that they had been forced by the foreman's news to alter their plans, the young folks found a great deal to occupy their time.

In the first place, the boys had yet to become acquainted with the ranch buildings and the corral. After they had made the rounds of these and had tried to ride several of the half-tamed ponies in the corral, they succeeded in unearthing an old croquet set from one of the bunkhouses.

"This is pretty slick," said Clem jubilantly. "All we have to do now is to find a level spot where the grass isn't too thick——"

"Or stubbly," suggested Mollie.

"Or stubbly," Clem accepted. "And we ought to have a first-rate game. What say, Roy?"

Roy, who had appeared rather glum and unsociable all morning, nodded indifferently.

"All right, I'll play. Though it's so long since I've held a croquet mallet, I won't know which end's the handle."

Lota giggled.

"I'm rather a dud at the game myself," she said. "But I do know how to hold the mallet."

No one would have known to watch the Bronson twins that they were not as care-free and happy as they seemed. As a matter of fact, they were deeply worried about the old lumberman and would have much preferred riding out with Dippy and the cowboys and Mr. Ackerson to the timber region. But they had their guests to consider and, like the good sports and Outdoor Girls that they were, had decided to give the girls and boys as good a time as possible under the circumstances.

So now they entered into the search for a croquet ground with apparent zest—while all the time they kept one eye on the horizon in the hope that Mr. Tower might send a messenger from his temporary headquarters with word of him.

They found a place that was almost flat—if one did not mind a few mounds and hummocks

here and there!—and proceeded to put up the croquet set.

Just when they were ready Carolyn suddenly complained of a headache and said that she must get back to the house.

It was so unusual for Carolyn Cooper to have anything the matter with her—she was one of those girls who look as delicate as a fairy and who still enjoy perfect health—that the girls were genuinely concerned.

"Oh, it isn't anything the least bit serious," she protested. "I don't need you all to come back and sit by my bedside and hold my hand. You just go on with your game and forget about me——"

"A little touch of sun, maybe," said Meg, concerned. "Better get Ming Wah or Mrs. Ackerson to mix you up a cold drink."

"Lie out in the hammock under the trees," Stella suggested. "You'll feel better in a jiffy."

Carolyn replied that she was sure of it and, with a wave of her hand, sauntered off toward the house.

She interviewed Ming Wah—being in far less awe of him than of Mrs. Ackerson—and the good-natured Chinaman soon mixed her up an iced lemonade that sparkled merrily in the glass

and made the girl feel better just to look at it.

She thanked Ming Wah and, glass in hand, went over to the comfortable, low-hung hammock beneath the trees.

A rustic table stood close to the hammock and this was invariably filled with reading matter of all types and description. Carolyn selected a magazine that looked good to her, sipped her ice cold drink gratefully and lay back in the hammock, prepared to enjoy herself thoroughly.

This hammock was hung at the north of the house and any one lying in it had a good view of the kitchen lean-to and the living room.

Lazily, Carolyn watched Ming Wah as he came from the lean-to, carrying a pail of slops for Nina, the pig; then her eyes fell to the book in her hand.

She must have fallen asleep, for she started suddenly and found herself sitting upright in the hammock. The book had slipped from her relaxed fingers.

She stared toward the house, then rubbed her eyes for better vision. No, she was *not* still asleep. And some one *was* climbing through the window into the living room!

CHAPTER XX

CAROLYN ACTS QUICKLY

Carolyn had sense enough to make no move but to remain just as she was until the stealthy figure had disappeared. Then she slipped from the hammock, and ran toward the house.

Her head was aching rather violently now, but, in her excitement, she scarcely noticed it. She reached the window through which the man had disappeared. Impatiently she realized that, even standing on tiptoe, she could not see through it.

There was an old box near by on which Ming Wah often sat when his day's work was done to whittle out of wood fantastic models of Chinese ships.

Quick as thought, Carolyn lifted the box and placed it beneath the window, still careful to make no noise. By climbing on top of it she could look into the window easily.

Cautiously Carolyn lifted her head above the sill. After the brilliant sunshine out of doors

the room at first seemed dark to her. She could see nothing distinctly.

Then the objects in the room began to stand out. In the south corner near the hall door she saw some one move.

Her heart stood still as she recognized the man who had climbed through the window.

But what was that he was standing in front of? Ah! Carolyn remembered suddenly! It was a desk—Mr. Ackerson's desk—the one that he had given Ming Wah instructions to guard. And Ming Wah was out somewhere—possibly still feeding the pigs!

The man bent over the desk. He was fumbling with the drawers, trying to open them. Suddenly Carolyn recognized this intruder as one of the men who had come to the ranch one certain day, demanding to see the ranch papers. It was the shorter of the two men—the one called Black!

She leaped down from the box and looked about her wildly in search of help. No one about, anywhere.

Ming Wah—he would not be much good, anyway! Mrs. Ackerson was probably upstairs making the beds or out in the kitchen garden pulling weeds.

Roy and Clem! They were the ones she must run to for aid, and quickly.

She ran lightfoot over the hot, burned-out prairie grass toward the spot where she had left the boys and girls only a short time before. She could still hear them laughing over their game of croquet. Oh, if they only knew!

She came up to them, breathless and, with finger to lips, silenced their exclamations of surprise.

"There's—a man—at the house!" she gasped. "He—climbed in the living-room window! He's trying to break into Mr. Ackerson's desk! Come quick or he'll do it——"

"Not while we're around!" cried Roy.

He threw down his mallet and started on a run for the house with the others following hot-foot after him.

Just before reaching the house they paused.

"You go around by the front, Roy," Clem whispered. "I'll dodge in by the window."

"Right-o!" returned Roy, and was off.

The girls followed Roy while Clem dodged in at the open living room window.

The man, Black, fairly caught before the rifled desk, papers in hand, looked about him quickly for a means of escape. With an in-

stinctive gesture he shoved the papers into his pocket and whirled to meet the boys.

The two lads leaped upon him and bore him to the ground. With a thud the three crashed to the floor. As they fell Roy hit his head against the corner of the desk, but not before he had dealt Black a vigorous blow or two. The shock loosened his hold upon the man and in that moment the fellow wriggled like a snake from Clem's grasp and staggered to his feet.

The college lad was up like a streak of lightning. Roy, a hand to his injured head, struggled to his feet.

But before either of the young men could move again toward the enemy, the man fell back. A hand slipped into his pocket.

"I've got you both covered," he growled. "Stand still, or I'll pack you full of lead!"

Roy thought the fellow was bluffing. "Anybody can make a bulge in his coat pocket without having a revolver there," he told the girls afterwards.

But Mollie was taking no chances. Even as Roy started forward she leaped between him and the enemy, locking his hands close to his sides.

"Don't, Roy!" she begged, half crying. "He's armed! He'll kill you!"

At the same time Irene cried out sharply.

"Clem! Don't be crazy! Do you *want* to get shot?"

She caught his arm and clung to him on one side while Stella hung on to his jacket.

"Let me go!" yelled Clem, trying frantically to free himself. "He's just bluffing. He hasn't any more got a gun than I have."

"Ain't, ain't I?" growled the man, and drew forth from his coat pocket as ugly a looking weapon as the girls had ever seen. "Well, just cast your eye on this and then say whether I'm bluffin'."

He backed slowly to the window, keeping the fuming boys at bay with the pointed weapon; retreated until he reached the window; then, with a sudden dash, was through it!

No longer to be restrained by the girls, Roy and Clem rushed to the window, jumping through it in pursuit of the fugitive.

A moment later they knew how futile it was to attempt to overtake him. The fellow had tethered his pony at the farther side of one of the outbuildings. Now he leaped to the back of the horse and, with a derisive wave of his hand toward his pursuers, was off.

Clem and Roy halted, red with chagrin and anger as the girls, panting from the chase, caught up to them.

Mollie ran up to Roy and caught him by the arm.

"You shouldn't have—gone after him, Roy!" she cried. "Suppose he had—shot you?"

She was trembling so that Roy looked down at her in a surprise that gradually changed to a dawning hope.

"Then—you would really have—cared, Mollie?" he asked softly.

Mollie's wide, fear-filled eyes suddenly lowered before the look in his. She even tried—belatedly—to withdraw her hand. But that, she found, was impossible, since Roy had covered it very firmly with his own.

"It *would* have made a difference to you, Mollie?" the young man asked again urgently. "You really would have cared?"

"You—you know I would," returned Mollie softly; and then did withdraw her hand, suddenly conscious that all the girls were looking at her.

Rather, almost all the girls were looking at her. Irene was the exception, and perhaps Mollie was the only one to surprise a tableau that was to set her thinking very seriously in the days to come.

For Mollie heard Irene say in a tone that she

had never heard that care-free young person use before:

"You really should be more careful, Clem. You take terrible chances with yourself. I—we—were terribly frightened!"

"I—we—were, were I?" Clem teased in return. But Mollie saw that Clem himself was puzzled by something quite new in this merry young girl whom he had taken so much for granted—up to now.

Mollie had the impression that Clem would not take Irene quite so much for granted hereafter!

Stella, watching with amazement and a sudden quite involuntary little thrill, communed with herself in this fashion.

"We were right the other day—about Irene. She is actually getting sentimental. Must be something in the air of New Moon Ranch! Oh, well," with a sigh, half amusement, half resignation, "if I have to have any one for a cousin-in-law, it might as well be Irene!"

CHAPTER XXI

AFTER HIM!

WHEN the Outdoor Girls and the boys returned to the ranch house, thoughtful and considerably sobered by what had taken place, they had other than romantic matters to absorb their attention.

They returned to the living room and went at once to the rifled desk.

"I suppose it *is* Mr. Ackerson's desk," said Clem, a little doubtfully.

"It surely is," Mollie returned. "I've seen him sitting at it many a time when I ran in unexpectedly."

"Let's see if we can find out what's missing," Meg suggested.

They examined the desk as well as possible, considering their complete ignorance of its former contents. The papers were in confusion, everything dragged out of the cubbyholes and littering the top of the desk and the floor on either side of it. They knew that some papers had been taken, for they had seen the rascal

shove a handful of them into his pocket. But just what and how important these papers were, they naturally could not tell.

"Probably was Uncle Dan's deed to the ranch," cried Meg. The girl was actually pale with excitement and anxiety.

"If they destroy that and it hasn't been recorded there won't be anything to prove Uncle Dan's title to the timberlands," cried Lota, wringing her hands. "Oh, what shall we do? How can we ever tell him about this when he comes back?"

"We should have camped in this room every minute while Mr. Ackerson and the hands were away," said Mollie remorsefully.

"I wish we had never found that silly old croquet set!" added Stella.

"Yeah, we swung a mallet while Rome burned," said Clem.

"Or Uncle Dan's papers."

"He ought to be notified," suggested Mollie.

Roy took her up, quickly.

"There's a telephone that connects this ranch house with Mr. Tower's shack in the timber country, isn't there?" he asked the twins.

Both Meg and Lota nodded eagerly.

"We'll telephone——"

"While we hop a couple of ponies and beat

it after Black," added Clem, restless again at the prospect of action.

Roy nodded.

"A couple of the boys are riding in from the range," he said, pointing eagerly. "We'll take them with us."

Meg and Lota were at once all eagerness to go with them. But Mollie vetoed the suggestion.

"The best thing for us to do is stay right here and look after the ranch," she pointed out. "You never know what may happen."

"Seems to me the worst *has* already happened," protested Meg.

But Mollie was firm.

"We'll stay here and guard the ranch!" she said.

However, it was with considerable envy that the Outdoor Girls watched the boys ride away a few moments later. They longed to be in the saddle, to travel with them, to give chase to the rascal who had robbed kindly Daniel Tower of something that might mean his financial ruin.

Reluctantly they turned back to the house.

Meg had telephoned the bad news to a very much startled executive at the farther end of

the telephone line who had promised to communicate at once with "the boss."

"And now that's all we can do," said Lota, roaming restlessly about the living room.

"The boys certainly have all the luck this time," agreed Stella.

"If they only catch that miserable thief and make him give back the papers I won't care," said Meg. "Oh, poor Uncle Dan! This will just about ruin him!"

Meanwhile Mollie methodically picked up the scattered papers and returned them to the desk. She manipulated the roll top and when it was closed, regarded the mutilated lock thoughtfully.

"Broken by something like a burglar's tool," she said musingly. "If we had come upon the thief only a few moments earlier we might have saved those papers."

"If Carolyn hadn't just happened to be nursing a headache we never would have come upon the thief at all," Lota reminded her. "We'd simply have found Uncle Dan's desk rifled and without the slightest notion of who did it."

"Which would have been worse," agreed Mollie. "Now the boys at least know whom they're after——"

An exclamation from the doorway cut short Mollie's sentence. Ming Wah stood there, the picture of consternation.

"No open desk," he cried, approaching Mollie, both hands outspread, evidently under the impression that she was the vandal. "Missee Ackelson nevah open desk. He vellee angly——"

"Yes, he will be very angry, Ming Wah," Meg broke in sternly, "when he finds that you let a man come in here and break open his desk. Where have you been all this time, anyway?"

The poor Chinaman was the picture of bewilderment and woe.

"Me feed pigs," he explained.

Meg snorted.

"You must have fallen asleep doing it," she commented mercilessly. "Anyway, a man got in here while you were gone, Ming Wah, and took some of Uncle Dan's important papers."

The Chinaman's face lost some of its expression of unutterable woe and became warlike.

"He steal papels!" he cried. "Which way he go? Ming Wah, he catch, pletty click!"

Only the little Chinaman's obvious sincerity and grief prevented the girls from laughing outright. Instead, Meg said, not quite so sternly:

"You're a little late, Ming Wah. The boys

have already gone after the thief. You'd better stay right here with us and try to see that nothing else is stolen!"

At this Ming Wah became all woe once more.

"Ming Wah disglace fo'evel," he mourned. "Boss, he no mo'e tlust Ming Wah. Ming Wah lose face. He gettee gate!"

"I suppose he means he'll lose his job," giggled Irene when Ming Wah, the very picture of woe, had shuffled from the room. "Poor thing! He's the saddest person I ever saw."

"Not nearly so sad as he will be," said Lota, pausing in her restless pacing of the floor to fling an angry glance in the direction of the kitchen. "Wait till Uncle Dan has a chance to talk to him."

"Now, Lota," Meg reproved her, "you know Uncle Dan is the gentlest person in the world. He probably wouldn't say nearly as much to poor old Ming Wah as you or I."

Lota sniffed.

"Well, I don't know about that," she returned. "I imagine a lot depends upon just how important the missing papers are!"

For a while the girls looked and listened for signs of the boys' return.

"The fellow couldn't have got very far before the boys gave chase," Meg pointed out. "He

started out in the direction of Dead Dog trail. Anyway, the boys ought to be able to follow him easily enough by the fresh track of his horse's hoofs in the sand——"

"Unless he doubles back and swims his horse across the creek," Lota added. "That's what he would naturally do to throw his pursuers off the track——"

"If they can only catch him before he has had time to destroy the papers!" added Carolyn. "But I suppose," she added, "that is the first thing the miserable thief would think of, probably—destroying the papers."

But Mollie shook her head.

"I don't think so," she said. "He won't have much time to look them over and make sure they're the right ones with the boys hot on his trail——"

Meg whirled upon Mollie.

"Perhaps he never got the right papers, after all!" she cried. "We didn't give him a great deal of time, you know——"

"That's an idea!" cried Lota, seizing eagerly upon the flimsiest straw of hope. "It would be a joke on him wouldn't it—the thief, I mean—if Uncle Dan's really important papers were safe in the drawer all the time?"

They all agreed, but without much convic-

tion, that it certainly would be a good joke on the thief.

Meg looked thoughtful, then sighed:

"If we only knew more about such things!" she said. "As for me, I wouldn't know a deed from a cookbook recipe. Oh, dear," with another and more impatient sigh, "what are we going to do?"

"Couldn't we go for a little ride or something?" suggested Irene longingly. "It's pretty dull just sitting here and waiting for the boys to come back."

"Especially when they don't come back," chuckled Carolyn. "Seems as if we might find something to amuse us in the meantime."

Mollie looked at her speculatively.

"Headache all gone?" she asked.

Carolyn put a hand to her pretty head.

"Forgot all about it," she confessed. "Must have had all the ache jarred out of me, I guess. Oh, dear, what can we do?"

"Let's take the ponies and ride over the ranch, Mollie," Stella coaxed. "We won't go far—we can keep the house within sight all the time."

"Anyway," Irene added drolly, "Ming Wah's in charge."

Mollie, who was at the window, shook her head absently.

"No, we aren't going away from here to-day," she said, with determination. "We are just going to sit right here and watch that—desk—" Her voice trailed off and her figure at the window seemed to stiffen.

Something in that straight back roused Stella's curiosity. She came over and joined Mollie at the window.

"Is the view so interesting? Do you—" she began, and then paused as she saw what it was that had aroused Mollie's interest.

Two horsemen had left the shelter of the woods and were galloping rapidly toward the house!

CHAPTER XXII

THE SECRET TUNNEL

Stella Sibley's exclamation brought all the girls running to the window.

"What is it?" cried Irene, trying to elbow the others aside.

Meg, Lota, and Carolyn rushed to the other window.

"The boys!" cried the latter. "They are coming back already."

Stella disagreed.

"I don't think it's the boys," she said. "They sit their horses differently. Besides, there's only two of them."

"May be some one riding in from the timber country," suggested Irene, straining her eyes.

"We can't tell till they get a little closer," said Mollie.

A moment later she added with apparent irrelevance:

"I wonder if there are any firearms in the house!"

Stella gasped.

"Why, Mollie——"

Meg interrupted impatiently.

"There are a couple of rifles in the tool shed."

"They are all rusted and old looking though," objected Lota. "I doubt if they're even loaded."

Carolyn said in a voice not quite steady:

"What does all this talk of firearms mean, anyway? Do you really think we'll need them, Mollie?"

"You never can tell," replied Mollie, in the same strange tone. "Anyway, it's always just as well to be on the safe side——"

"There they are!" cried Meg.

The riders had disappeared for a moment, hidden by the ranch buildings. Now they reappeared again—on foot. They had apparently tethered their horses some distance from the house.

The girls recognized them at once.

"Black and Tisson!" gasped Meg. "Oh, what shall we do!"

Instinctively she backed away against the desk, standing there trembling but resolute. It was as though she challenged any one to open that desk again—if he dared!

Lota said, trembling:

"You were right, Mollie. They didn't get the right papers. They've come back for them!"

"They won't get them!" declared Mollie. She spoke far more confidently than she felt. What could five unarmed girls, determined and brave though she knew the Outdoor Girls to be, do against two rascals who were also determined and who were armed as well?

Mollie turned swiftly from the window. Her eyes blazed as she faced Meg and Lota.

"Can you get me those rifles from the toolshed?" she demanded.

"We'll try," they answered, and started for the door.

They were too late. Just as they started to leave the room, the two men entered it.

The Outdoor Girls, wide-eyed, backed against the desk and eyed the intruders defiantly.

A flush of red-hot anger rushed to Meg's face, making her, for the moment, absolutely unafraid.

"What," she demanded, "do you want?"

The man, Black, scowled and made as though to push her aside.

At that moment the girls noticed with a fierce satisfaction that one of the fellow's eyes was badly swollen, was almost closed, in fact, and showed a marked discoloration where somebody's fist had crashed into it. His lip was cut, too—another sign of Roy's fistic prowess.

"None of your business what we want!" he replied in response to the girl's question. "You going to get out or have we got to put you out?"

He made a threatening gesture toward Meg, but the second man, Tisson, interfered. He pushed his companion back, at the same time thrust a hand significantly into his coat pocket.

"There, there, Black," he remonstrated, leering at the girls. "You take the wrong tone with these pretty young ladies. They ain't goin' to make no trouble for us, no siree. Because I've a notion they're jest as sensible as they are good lookin' and so probably know what's good for 'em."

He leered at Meg again, but she held her ground, unflinching.

"What do you want?" she demanded again.

"We want some papers out of that desk," said Tisson. His smile disappeared. He looked suddenly as thin-lipped and cruel as Black. "I take it you don't want any trouble, young woman. So you'd better step aside."

It was Lota who spoke now. Her voice trembled, but, for all that, she was as determined and fearless as her twin.

"The papers in that desk belong to Uncle Dan," she said. "That man," pointing to Black, "broke in here this morning like a common thief

and stole some of them. He'd better give them back," she added, advancing—actually advancing—upon the two men, "if he knows what's good for him!"

But Tisson gripped her arm and pushed her back roughly. At the same time the men produced revolvers and leveled them at the now thoroughly frightened girls.

"I was going to cut out the rough stuff," said Tisson, his eyes narrowed. "Thought maybe you had some common sense. But we ain't got all day to stand here and argue with you. If you want to be treated rough, all right."

His voice changed suddenly, became grim, ugly.

"Now you get out of here!" he ordered. "And get quick!"

There was no escape. The girls knew they were beaten and made no protest when they were herded, at the point of a pistol, from the house and past the ranch buildings to the corral.

Angry as they were, they had no chance against two armed men. Those rifles in the toolshed! Ming Wah! Where was he?

Into the corral the men forced them, lifted the heavy piece of wood that barred the gate and let it fall into place with a sound of finality.

Finally Tisson grinned, a sinister, wolf-toothed grin.

"You're bright girls," he said. "Maybe one or two of you will get a notion to climb the fence. But we'll be watchin'—*with* a gun—from the house, so maybe you'd better change your mind!"

Fuming, helpless, the girls watched the two return, running to the house.

"Fine guardians we are!" cried Meg, with a moan. "Lot of good it did us to stay at home and watch the desk!"

"If the boys would only come back!" cried Stella. "Wonder how they came to miss Black."

"Probably doubled back on them!" cried Lota, striding up and down, watching the house with desperate eyes. "Crossed the creek and threw the boys off the scent."

"Tisson must have been with Black all the time," Mollie suggested.

Stella nodded thoughtfully.

"Waiting to see how he'd pull off the job——"

"Then when he found Black had got the wrong papers they came back together to get the right ones," Irene surmised.

Meg nodded, her usually good-natured mouth set in a grim line.

"Figured on getting away with the papers—the right ones—before the boys got back."

"They just about figured right it seems," said Lota miserably. "They'll be away any minute now, and we absolutely helpless to stop them."

"I've a good mind to climb the fence, anyway," mused Mollie. "I'd be almost willing to take the chance of getting shot if I thought we could make it!"

Stella looked at her eagerly.

"Let's!" she cried.

But Meg interfered.

"Wait!" she said. "There's some one over there by the bunkhouse! Who is it?"

The others followed the direction of Meg's pointing finger and in a moment saw what it was that had attracted her attention.

A small figure, crouched double, had detached itself from the shadows about the bunkhouse and was running swiftly across the cleared space toward them.

"Ming Wah!" cried Carolyn. "Why, I'd forgotten all about him!"

As swiftly as a rabbit the little Chinaman scuttled over to the corral gate. The girls watched breathlessly while he tugged at the bar —raised it.

"You come out, click!" he muttered, and again scuttled across the cleared space toward the shelter of the bunkhouse.

Praying that they would not be seen from the house, the girls followed Ming Wah's lead.

Crouched against the side of the building Meg said accusingly:

"You had a gun, Ming Wah. Why didn't you use it?"

Ming Wah explained in his broken English with much waving about of his yellow, claw-like hands.

"Men catch Ming Wah without gun," he said. "Ming Wah lun. They think him flaid. But Ming Wah no flaid. He come get missies——"

"But we can't reach the house without being seen," Lota interrupted impatiently. "And even if we could, we are unarmed——"

"The rifles in the toolshed," suggested Mollie.

But here Ming Wah, in spite of his meekness, ventured again to interrupt.

"Ming Wah know sec'et passage," he said. "Passage lead und'-glound to house. Come! We su'plise bad men!"

The girls exchanged mystified, startled glances. Meg turned swiftly to the Chinaman.

"Lead on, Ming Wah!" she said breathlessly. "We're with you—to the death!"

The Chinaman ducked his head in a funny gesture and again scuttled before them. He was a curious little figure, but the girls followed him eagerly, hopefully. Who knew but what there might still be a chance of their outwitting these rascals, Black and Tisson!

A secret passage! The very thought of it thrilled the girls.

Ming Wah led them into the bunkhouse. There, in one corner, was a trapdoor. He lifted this and disclosed a dark hole.

"I get lante'n," he whispered. "We need light!"

A few moments later the girls were glad indeed of this precaution on the part of their guide. The hole into which he led them seemed to lead down into the bowels of the earth. They descended by steep stone steps that seemed endless.

Carolyn slipped and gripped Mollie by the arm.

"Gracious!" she gasped. "Do you suppose he intends to bury us alive?"

CHAPTER XXIII

A SURPRISE ATTACK

"I HOPE not," said Mollie, in a none-too-steady voice, in reply to Carolyn's question. "It looks as if he expects to take us straight through to China."

"His native land," giggled Carolyn. "Oh dear, this is the most awful hole I was ever in."

But even as they spoke Ming Wah hissed a warning to them.

"We are leaching the bottom," he said.

They did, with a suddenness that jarred them, for they had been expecting more steps. Nevertheless, it was a relief to feel their feet on solid ground again, even if it was a rather damp and evil-smelling ground.

Meg and Lota went on ahead, close behind the lantern held by Ming Wah. In spite of their impatience, their progress was necessarily slow.

The tunnel was so low that they were forced to duck their heads to prevent hitting them against the roof. It was narrow, too, so that they went Indian fashion, one close behind the

other. Those at the rear of the procession had little good of Ming Wah's lantern. They stumbled along blindly, clutching at each other for safety's sake.

"Oh, what a place!" cried Irene, who brought up the extreme rear. "If we ever get out of here alive, no amount of money can ever tempt me into it again."

"There must be an end," consoled Stella, who was next to the last in line. "Just hang on tight and hope for the best."

To all of them the tunnel seemed endless. And at every step they thought impatiently:

"Suppose Black and Tisson find what they want before we can reach the house? Then all this will be for nothing!"

But the tunnel did have an end.

Ming Wah paused suddenly—so suddenly that Lota and Meg almost ran him down, lantern and all.

"We go now into woodshed," hissed Ming Wah. "F'om thele we pass into kitchen, then into loom where lascals are. We catch 'em!"

"Let's hope so!" murmured Meg fervently.

"Hurry up, Ming Wah," added Lota. "We may be too late, even now."

Again they encountered steps, but they were not so numerous now and led upward.

The little Chinaman handed his lantern to Lota while he pushed upward with his shoulders against what appeared to be the solid roof of the tunnel.

Gradually something gave; there was a tiny rift of light, daylight. A breeze blew down into that dank tunnel, a breeze from the out-of-doors, wafted through the open door of the woodshed.

The crack grew wider, gradually resolved itself into a square of light. Thankfully the girls climbed up the slippery steps to the solid, freshly-sanded floor of the woodshed. Close beside this was the toolshed. Ming Wah extinguished the lantern, placed it noiselessly upon a shelf. Meanwhile Meg lifted two rifles from pegs at the rear of the toolshed. She handed one to Mollie.

"Even if they aren't loaded," she whispered, "they may serve the purpose."

Mollie nodded and took a resolute grip of the rifle. She was almost as afraid of a gun as Lota, but would have died before admitting it!

Silently they made their way from the woodshed to the lean-to kitchen; slipped into the hall and from there, noiseless as Indians, to the door of the living room.

Mollie was in the lead. Meg came next with

her twin hugging close to her. Then Stella and Irene. Carolyn brought up the rear with Ming Wah looking timidly over her shoulder.

The first cautious glance into the room assured the girls that fortune at last favored them.

Both men were busily engaged with their backs turned to the door. Evidently they did not expect attack from that direction.

Black muttered angrily as he rummaged through the desk. Tisson fumbled with the knob of a wall safe that, up to the moment, had passed unnoticed by the girls.

But the object that instantly caught and held the girls' attention was the small table close to the door.

Upon this table, drawing their eyes as surely as a magnet does steel, were three revolvers!

Two of these grim weapons undoubtedly belonged to Black and Tisson. The other was probably the one taken from the Chinaman, Ming Wah, when he had attempted to oppose the ruthless intruders.

Quick as thought the Outdoor Girls knew what they had to do. They acted instantly upon the suggestion. When Black and Tisson, warned by some sound behind them, whirled about, it was to find themselves confronted by

six determined girls and the Chinaman, five girls armed and all with the appearance of "meaning business"!

Black growled out something and clinched his hands as though he meant to leap upon the enemy.

But Meg spoke curtly in a cold voice that matched her manner.

"We are armed and you are not. We don't want to hurt you, but you've got to do as we say."

"Oh, we have, have we! Well, we'll see about that!"

In a towering rage, his face purple with fury, Black started forward again. But Tisson, eyes narrowed in his sneering face, lips drawn back again from wolfish teeth, caught his arm.

"Don't be a fool," he growled. "Those kids mean business. So does the fool Chinaman. What you trying to do, flirt with the undertaker?"

Black restrained himself with difficulty.

"Drop them guns! Drop 'em!" he cried.

"We will, maybe, when we've got you where we want you!"

The other girls marveled at the strength and resource of this child of the West. They afterwards admitted that it was largely Meg's doing.

"The rest of us just stood back and tried to look fierce," said Irene.

"And I bet we looked scared to death!" added Stella.

However that may be, they did manage to get Black and Tisson into the kitchen. From there they backed the two rascals into what might have been either a small room or a large closet, but which, in reality, served Ming Wah as a pantry. This pantry could, upon occasion, be turned into a prison for it possessed a lock on the outside.

With a feeling of unmixed triumph the girls shot the bolt upon the surly pair. By strategy —Ming Wah's strategy—they had entrapped the enemies of Daniel Tower; had saved his precious papers; had, perhaps, even preserved his fortune for him.

"Just the same, I wish the boys would come," said Carolyn nervously. "We can't keep them shut up in there forever."

Meg cried out suddenly and darted through the door.

"Now what's the matter with her!" cried Stella, and followed to find out.

Meg was just in the nick of time. There was a window in the pantry. It was a small window, set high in the wall, and, just for the

moment, the girls had forgotten it entirely.

But the prisoners had not forgotten. Black, hoisted, presumably, upon the shoulders of Tisson, was just thrusting his head through the small opening.

Meg looked a very ferocious young person as she brandished her weapon.

"Look out!" cried Black in alarm. "That might go off!"

"It certainly will," replied Meg, "if you come any further through that window!"

Evidently Black decided that she meant it; for his head disappeared and did not reappear again.

Meg took a seat upon a convenient, moss-grown stump. She still looked very purposeful.

"Lucky I came out just when I did," she told the admiring girls. "Put them in the door and they come out the window! Lots of fun!"

"Suppose I try to get in touch with Uncle Dan again," suggested Lota. "He'd want to know about this."

Meg nodded.

"Won't do any harm. And," she added with apparent irrelevance, "I must say, this stump isn't any too comfortable a seat!"

So, while Lota went to telephone to her Uncle Dan, Meg, supported by Mollie—who was

armed with one of the pistols—stood, or rather sat, guard upon the stump, while the other girls and Ming Wah watched the pantry door to forestall any attempt on the part of the captives to break out that way.

In the midst of the excitement Mrs. Ackerson appeared from her prolonged occupation of picking herbs for medicine. When the girls told her, as briefly as possible, what had happened, it seemed for a moment that the good woman was about to faint.

They eased her into a chair, however, and gave her water to drink, assuring her meanwhile that all danger was absolutely at an end.

"We've got them locked safe in the pantry," Stella reiterated. "They can't get out, no matter how hard they try."

But Mrs. Ackerson shook her head dubiously.

"You never can tell. Rascals as bad as them ain't safe even behind a locked door. I ain't trustin' them, I tell you I ain't!"

As though to prove the truth of this doleful prophecy, a strange sound now made itself heard from within the pantry. There was not the slightest doubt that it came from within the pantry—after listening for an uneasy moment, the girls were sure of that.

It was a slight, scrape—scrape, as though

some rough object were drawn cautiously over wood.

Lota came into the room after 'phoning to her uncle. She joined the girls and Mrs. Ackerson and the anxious-faced Ming Wah, listening with them.

"What *is* it?" demanded Stella finally, in a hushed voice.

Lota shook her head doubtfully. Then suddenly her eyes lighted with conviction.

"There's a saw in the pantry, isn't there, Ming Wah?" she demanded.

The Chinaman ducked his head.

"Then that's a saw, cutting through wood," whispered Lota. "They are trying to escape through the floor!"

But while the girls hesitated, not certain just what step to take next, Mollie cried out suddenly from her perch on the stump. It was a glad cry and drew those within the kitchen to the door.

The leader of the Outdoor Girls pointed to a small knot of horsemen galloping toward them over the prairie road.

CHAPTER XXIV

BETWEEN TWO FIRES

Into the mind of each of the Outdoor Girls leaped the question: "Which is it, friend or foe?"

What was their relief and joy then when they recognized in the approaching riders Mr. Tower, Clem Field, Roy Anderson and two of the cowboys from the ranch.

Meg could not be removed from her post on the stump that commanded the pantry window. Ming Wah remained in the kitchen to thwart any attempt on the part of the prisoners to break forth in that direction. But the rest of the Outdoor Girls rushed to meet the newcomers.

Mr. Tower flung himself from his horse, his ruddy, kindly face a mixture of fear, anxiety and anger. He kissed Lota and his eyes traveled swiftly about the group of excited girls.

"Where's Meg?" he demanded.

"Outside the pantry window with a rifle," said

Lota, giggling a little at the memory of her warlike twin. "Come and see!"

Clem and Roy and the two cowboys dismounted and followed Mr. Tower to the rear of the ranch house. There they found Meg, still grimly watching the window in the pantry, the rifle held across her knee.

From the girls, even in the short space of time, Clem and Roy had already heard something of what had happened since they had left the ranch that morning in pursuit of the rascal, Black.

Now, after hurriedly greeting Meg, they dashed into the kitchen, intent upon investigating the pantry and its prisoners without further delay.

The cowboys remained outdoors with Meg, in accordance with Mr. Tower's orders, to help her guard the pantry window.

The boys were about to slip the bolt that secured the door when the big lumberman pushed past them and himself laid hands upon the bolt.

"This pleasure is going to be mine!" he told them. His ruddy face was no longer good-natured and kindly. On the contrary, it bore upon it an expression that boded no good either for Black or Tisson.

Reluctantly the boys stood aside. They had

a score to settle with that man Black themselves!

Mr. Tower pulled back the bolt, swung the door wide.

Those behind him gasped. The pantry was empty!

They crowded into the pantry—that is, as many of them as were able to. It was easy to discover the way in which Black and Tisson had made their escape.

There was a hole in the pantry floor—a jagged hole that showed where the boards had been ripped up by impatient hands at the end. Through this hole Black and Tisson had dropped to the dirt floor beneath the pantry. A little further on a hole had been hollowed out of this dirt under the rather light foundation of the pantry and this told its own story of the rascals' escape.

"But it has taken time to do all this!" Mollie cried. "They must have barely escaped!"

The same thought had come to the minds of them all. It might still be possible to overtake the runaways!

They rushed outside, searching eagerly.

"Over there!" cried Stella suddenly. "The other side of the bunkhouse. There they are!"

As she spoke, two running figures emerged from the shelter of the bunkhouse, leaped into the saddle, and pounded off across the prairie.

No time to waste now!

With a shout, the boys hurriedly mounted their jaded ponies. Mr. Tower, for all his bulk, was as agile as they. In a moment they were all in the saddle, flying off after the enemy. Their ponies' hoofs fairly struck sparks from the harsh prairie stubble.

But the girls were not to be left behind this time!

"Come on!" cried Meg, dashing off in the direction of the corral. "I've got to do something to make up for letting those scoundrels escape! We're going, too!"

With the help of the two cowboys, who had remained behind by Mr. Tower's orders, the girls saddled their ponies and were off before the others were fairly out of sight.

Off they galloped, short hair flying in the breeze, heads bent close to their ponies' heads, urging them on.

They were overtaking the boys and Mr. Tower with surprising ease. The horses they rode, fresh from the corral, were running for the love of it, while the others, jaded to start with, ran because they must.

"We'll be up with them in no time!" Mollie shouted triumphantly. "Go on, Beauty," she cried to the little sorrel mare she rode. "Show them what you can do! That's the girl!"

They topped the ridge of a low hill as the boys and Mr. Tower pounded along at the foot of it. Meg drew in her pony sharply.

"Look!" she cried, as the others drew rein beside her. She pointed with her quirt to where two riders galloped recklessly along a narrow, treacherous trail. "Black and Tisson!"

"They're making for Golden Range!" cried Lota. "If they make it, they're safe."

"*If* they make it!" repeated Meg, her eyes shining. "There's a short trail, Lota! If we could head them off—turn them back——"

Lota saw the point at once and nodded eagerly.

"Come on!" she cried.

The girls took the short trail. It was a treacherous one; a trail that sloped steeply upward until one had the sensation of climbing a steep wall; a trail that wound about the mountain with a hair's breadth margin of safety; a trail that forded a stream so swift and so deep that the strong little range ponies had all they could do to keep their gallant heads above the water.

The girls did it all with an exuberance and a total absence of fear that amazed them when they came to think about it afterward. They took breath-taking risks as calmly as though such things were of everyday occurrence.

They came out at last upon the intersection of the two trails. After the gruelling race their ponies were still fresh, the girls, themselves, untired.

"If we're only in time!" cried Lota.

Meg silenced her with a quick gesture. For along the trail that led to Golden Range came the regular clop-clop of horses' hoofs.

"Here they come!" She flourished her quirt in the air as belligerently as, a short time before, she had flourished her rifle.

"We'll ride down to meet them, girls! They'll think it's an army coming!"

The girls touched their eager ponies with the quirts and they were off with a bound and a tossing of heads to meet and conquer the enemy.

They made a brave noise, the little cavalcade. Perhaps Black and Tisson did think it was an army coming. At any rate, they stopped not to reason about it, but whirled their two horses and made back along the trail as hard as they could go.

Probably their hope was to evade both their

old pursuers and the newcomers by turning on to another narrow trail that led into a heavily wooded section that was almost jungle. There they might have lain safely hid until the enemy tired of the search and went on about their business.

However that may be, they failed to reach the trail. Before they had quite arrived there, three weary but dogged horsemen rounded a curve. For a second time that day Black and Tisson found themselves confronted by firearms held by persons who, quite evidently, "meant business."

"Put up your hands!" Mr. Tower ordered. "We'll stand no more nonsense from either of you!"

The girls came riding up, flushed and victorious.

The boys and Mr. Tower stared in astonishment.

"We were wondering what made these rascals turn back," said Daniel Tower.

Lota struck an attitude, one hand on hip, the other upraised, after the manner of Joan D'Arc.

"Wonder no longer!" she bade him majestically. "The heroines are before you! We—even we—have done it! The Outdoor Girls!"

CHAPTER XXV

THE END OF THE ROMANCE

"I DON'T know whether you deserve a medal or a good scolding," grumbled Daniel Tower. "You must have taken Dead Man's Trail, and that was as much as your life was worth. No, you ought to be spanked."

"Well, wait till we get back to the ranch, anyway!" said Meg, with an impudent face at him. "This is hardly the place."

"No, and there are other more important things to be attended to," said Daniel Tower. His gruff manner covered a world of pride in the girls' achievement and, what was more, the girls knew it. He could not fool them! "You lads keep these scoundrels covered," he directed Clem and Roy, "while I see how much of my property they're totin' around with them!"

Black scowled as the lumberman relieved him of his cartridge belt, flinging it over to the girls. The same service was performed for Tisson.

Then the old lumberman went methodically through their pockets, pulling out, last of all,

the document whose loss might have cost him a fortune.

Daniel Tower smiled into the half-closed, sullen eyes of the man called Tisson.

"So you thought you'd cripple me, did you?" said the lumberman evenly. "Take away the one real, guaranteed proof I've got that the big timber tract on the ranch belongs to me. Thought you'd get me tied up in court and while I was arguin' with the lawyers you'd sneak out the best of my trees there. Or maybe," here his eyes narrowed speculatively and into them crept a gleam like steel with the sun on it, "you'd get me so tied up in litigation, you'd get the ranch away from me altogether. That it?"

Black scowled and shifted from one foot to the other. Tisson's thin lips hardened into a straight line.

"You got it pretty straight, partner," he said, then added, with an insolent grin: "A minute more and we'd a got away with it, too."

Here Clem laughed and slapped his knee in thorough enjoyment of the joke.

"Scared by a parcel of girls!" he chuckled. "And probably not a gun among 'em. Say, that's *rich!*"

Swift rage swept up into the face of Tisson.

He started forward, fists clenched, but the cold, grey muzzle of Daniel Tower's revolver changed his mind again.

"Easy there!" said the old lumberman in his deceptively gentle voice. "It's our turn to laugh now, Tisson, you know, and I reckon we're goin' to do a sight of it in the next few days—especially when we think of you sittin' in jail gnawin' your fingernails——"

"And thinking of how a bunch of spunky girls put one over on you," said Clem, still chuckling. "I can see where I'm going to get lots of good laughs out of that myself."

But Roy was not laughing. His eyes were upon Mollie, and he was thinking of the risk she had run in company with the other girls. Perhaps that was why he could not laugh quite as easily as Clem—just then.

Other papers besides the deed to the ranch were found upon the persons of Black and Tisson. When Mr. Tower was satisfied that he had recovered all of his stolen property, he ordered the two rascals to remount their horses.

"What you going to do with us?" Black asked in a surly voice.

"What do you think?" retorted Daniel Tower. "Haven't any hopes of my turnin' you loose, have you, without a visit, first, to the

sheriff? I'd as soon turn loose a rattlesnake!"

He turned to the girls.

"You'd better ride back to the ranch while I hand over the prisoners," he directed. "You boys had better go with them," he added, with a quiet smile at some private and rather pleasant thought of his own. "Otherwise, they might take it into their heads to go back by Dead Man's Trail. These girls here," with a chuckle, "surely will bear watching."

"Sure you can take care of these scoundrels by yourself, sir?" said Roy, who would have preferred to see the business to the finish.

The lumberman laughed outright and shook his head over the question.

"Listen, lad!" he said. "If the time ever comes when Dan Tower needs help with a couple o' scalawags like this when he's armed and they ain't, then's the time to put me in a home for ancient derelicts what ain't got the sense they were born with. You get back to the ranch. I'll join you before very long and then we'll have what you might call a bang-up celebration."

That was a joyful ride back to the ranch. The boys, of course, demanded to know all that had happened after they had set off on Black's trail.

The girls told them, or tried to tell them, but as they all spoke at once and with a great deal of excitement, it is doubtful if the boys ever obtained a really coherent account of those exciting hours.

"What we want to know," said Stella finally, "is where you were all the time and how that man Black managed to throw you off the trail."

"We followed the wrong trail almost from the start," Clem confessed shamefacedly. "I suppose the scoundrel knew this part of the country better than we——"

"Which wouldn't be hard," Roy interposed, with a grin.

"And he probably turned off the trail, doubling back here, soon after we gave chase."

"He must have come up with that fellow, Tisson, somewhere on the way," said Meg.

"But what gets me is why Black came back here at all the second time," said Stella. "He had already taken the papers——"

"Which were probably the wrong ones," Lota pointed out. "So then Tisson came back with him to try and get the deed to the ranch which was what they really wanted all the time."

"A little too deep for me," complained Irene.

"All I know is that we've crowded thrill enough into one day to last for two weeks."

Carolyn passed a hand across her forehead.

"Excitement must be good for headaches," she said, with a funny little grimace. "Anyway, mine's gone!"

When they got back to the ranch they found Ming Wah preparing supper exactly as though nothing extraordinary had happened. He received with a wide grin the information that Black and Tisson were on their way to the lock-up and that all was well once more with his beloved "boss."

"Ming Wah is the real hero, after all," said Lota, teasing the little Chinaman. "Just think, if it hadn't been for him, we would never have known there was a secret tunnel from the bunkhouse!"

Of course the boys had to be shown this tunnel at once, and the young folks had great fun exploring it.

Ming Wah surpassed himself in the matter of dinner that evening, and afterward they had what Daniel Tower had been pleased to describe as a bang-up celebration.

"With Black and Tisson safe in jail and ownership of the timber tract settled beyond any

possibility of a dispute," said the old lumberman, face shining with content, "we can cut up now a little bit with an easy conscience. We'll have the boys in and give a regular barn dance."

"Pretty good," said Lota, and clapped her hands. "Buffer plays a mean fiddle too."

"Don't I know it!" Carolyn took her up eagerly. "I heard him out in the bunkhouse the other night and wanted to invite him in; only," with a demure smile, "I thought perhaps it wouldn't be good form!"

"Anything's good form to-night," roared Mr. Tower. "We'll even invite Ming. Come now, let's get busy!"

They rolled up the scattered rugs in the living room, turned on the phonograph—the ranch was not quite up-to-date enough yet to boast a radio—and danced among themselves until the cowboys began to drop in one by one, to stand in corners of the room, not quite sure what to do with their hands and feet.

But Daniel Tower soon divested them of shyness. The phonograph was turned off and Buffer was set to work with his fiddle. The way that boy could play!

They danced a Virginia reel first, with Dan Tower leading off with Carolyn and the cowboys choosing partners among the girls. Clem

caught Mollie before Roy could get to her, and Roy, trying hard to conceal his jealousy, swung Stella into the dance.

Then, when they were at the end of the line, Clem danced Mollie near the door of the living room and the two went out on the porch together!

All the girls saw it and held their breath to see what would happen next. Only Irene laughed and talked a little too much and seemed not to notice where Clem and Mollie had gone. But the other girls knew her seeming indifference for what it was and were not in any way to be deceived by it!

Meanwhile Clem and Mollie were out on the porch of the ranch house. Mollie pointed to the sky where the moon was just edging its way from behind obscuring clouds.

"It won't be a new moon to-night, Clem," said Mollie softly.

Clem smiled and the smile was whimsical and a little sad.

"A real full moon, Mollie," he said. "But it's just as good, really, as the new moon, isn't it? For making decisions, I mean."

Mollie looked up at him quickly. She took his hand in a quick, comradely, half-pleading gesture.

"You know that I *have* made my decision, don't you, Clem?" she asked.

"I think I've known for some time it was Roy," replied Clem, after a moment's hesitation. "It *is* Roy, isn't it, Mollie?"

Mollie nodded quickly and turned away.

"I thought you'd understand. You—you've been such a good chum, Clem."

Clem straightened and there was not even the shadow of a smile on his face now.

"I—I wish you every happiness, Mollie," he said. When Mollie looked up again, he was gone.

With a little sigh the girl turned and strolled down the steps of the porch out toward the corral, out toward the spot that was bathed in the light of the full moon.

She lingered for some time, breathing in the deep stillness and beauty of the prairie night. Then, how she never knew, Roy was beside her.

Dear old dependable, faithful Roy! Mollie smiled as she looked at him standing there, hands clenched a little, face anxious.

"I saw you go out with Clem," he began.

"Did you see Clem go back alone?" asked Mollie innocently. She had turned away and a wicked little smile touched the corners of her lips.

"I did see Clem go back alone," said Roy, coming a little nearer. His face was very serious in the moonlight. "Does that—mean anything, Mollie?"

"You great, big, foolish, old thing!" cried Mollie, with a laugh that was not all laugh. "Of course it means something! It means—just what you want it to mean. Roy Anderson, do I have to draw you a diagram?"

Evidently Roy thought that this was not quite necessary, for he immediately did his duty as any one who had waited so long and faithfully for Mollie should do it. The full moon looked down at them and smiled.

Only a few months later there was another wedding in Deepdale. It was a pretty wedding and everybody was there, everybody that mattered, that is.

The Outdoor Girls, both married and single, answered to a full roll call. Every one of her friends had sent a beautiful present—Mollie had a long table packed full of gifts—but it is safe to say that there was none she treasured quite so much as those that came from the Outdoor Girls.

"The last of the old crowd," said Amy, a little wistfully, as Mrs. Roy Anderson came down

the church aisle on the arm of her proud and happy young husband, followed by their only attendants, Paul and Dora Billette.

"But I'm glad—oh *so* glad—it was Roy," remarked Betty contentedly.

On her other side, Grace nudged Betty gently.

"Look over there at Clem," she said. "He seems to have taken Mollie's marriage philosophically."

Betty smiled a little as she looked over to the pew where Clem bent toward pretty, animated Irene, listening with evident enjoyment to her merry chatter.

"They are going to have a wonderful time, those unmarried Outdoor Girls," said Betty, and her voice, like Amy's, was just a wee bit wistful. "They are such a darling crowd of girls!"

"Never mind!" said Grace, and laughed the contented, assured laugh of the happy young matron, "they will all come to this," with a wave of her hand toward the disappearing bride and groom. "Every last one of them, in time! You just wait and see!"

THE END

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